

ODDS ON BLUEFEATHER

*Being the Further Adventures of
Mr George Berkeley*

by

LAURENCE W. MEYNELL

AUTHOR OF
"BLUEFEATHER" "WATCH THE WALL"
"PAID IN FULL" ETC.



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TO
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CHAPTER I

NOBODY THERE!

To match the hour, the man. For fifteen years Europe had looked for a leader, until hope long deferred had made sick at heart the war-weary peoples, and men and women on every hand had begun to turn hopelessly away, tired and listless and dispirited.

Everywhere the people of the earth cried out for the bread of peace, and on every hand their leaders offered nothing but the hard stones of war and the rumours of war. It was said openly that another war would certainly destroy what remained of civilization, possibly destroy all human life itself; and men heard the words listlessly, and went away uncaring, as a man sentenced to death hears the Judge's fatal words in a daze, and is unmoved by them. Men tortured the fullness of the earth into instruments of destruction, and the common peoples looked on in apathetic dismay while the wood was hewn, the nails sharpened, wherewith to crucify humanity.

Then, almost from nowhere, it seemed, the Portent. Not from the High Places, not from the Courts or Chancelleries, hardly, it seemed, from any known source, came the Man.

His advent to pre-eminence was startling. In February the average man had heard nothing of Paul Verney, and except for an obscure paragraph or two the newspapers never mentioned him. By November his name was in every mouth and the newspapers flamed with his photographs. By the following February men hailed

simplicity. He dealt in no complicated proposals taking up hundreds of pages of print, and as difficult to understand as a lawyer's Act of Parliament. He put forward three points, written actually on a sheet of notepaper, which every man in every street from York to Yokohama and from Sidmouth to Sydney could understand in a moment. In a week they became the most famous sentences in the world after the Ten Commandments, and any man you spoke to in the bar of your favourite inn could tell you offhand how they ran.

They were:

- (1) All military aircraft to be abolished.
- (2) All civilian aircraft to be taken over by an International Aerial Board of Control, and all aerial communications to be administered by the Board.
- (3) No expenditure whatsoever—beyond the pay of men already under arms—to be made on any sort of armaments during the next fifteen years

That historic sheet of notepaper was laid before the Cabinet, and the question was asked: "Do you, as the accredited representatives of your people, in the most solemn and sacrosanct manner possible, pledge yourself, and the country which you represent, to fulfil these conditions provided other countries will do the same?"

The whole world waited while for three days the British Cabinet deliberated on its decision; and when, at the end of three days, that decision was made known in the simple but sufficient phrase "We do," and the aged Lord Finewater's signature was appended to the proposals, the whole world breathed again. Like a sleeper

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waking from a long and terrible nightmare, humanity stirred to see the first streaks of dawn in the sky.

That was Veincy's first great triumph. He could in the modern phrase, have cashed in on his newly won fame and become the hero of the hour. Such, of course, was entirely foreign to the man's nature. He wanted peace, not popularity. And although he laboured solely on their behalf, he could not but despise the Press-infected multitudes who clamoured after him as they would have done after any new thing.

Armed with this tremendous weapon, the assent of the most powerful and most widely spread empire in the world, he went to the Continent and applied himself to a task which might well have daunted the most optimistic

He set about getting agreement on those vital points among the armed and hostile neighbours of Europe. But now the pressure of public opinion behind him was terrific, and mountains which had seemed immovable began to yield. Italy, to most people's surprise, spoke straightway and convincingly for peace. Spain and Portugal and all the small Powers of the North of Europe hurried to agree. Turkey (and of all new portents in Europe surely this one of a virile, united, and honourable Turkey was the strangest!) did not lag behind, and the multifarious brood of lesser States which Versailles produced—Jugoslavia and the rest of them—came into line.

Naturally the main difficulty lay with France and Germany. They were like men whose hands have been at one another's throats for so long that by very custom they have stiffened there and are hard to dislodge. Yet in the end even with them the one unanswerable

argument told. If neither of you spends anything on armaments for fifteen years neither of you will be any worse off at the end of that period.

So again Verney triumphed.

There remained only the final step to lift at a stroke the hideous burden of fear, and all the black and bitter things that go with fear, from the peoples of the earth.

It was arranged—Verney arranged it—that on the twenty-fifth day of March, the day which in Merrie England was known by the fair name of Lady Day, two representatives of every consenting nation should meet in London solemnly and publicly to set their signatures to the Three Points in the sight of all mankind.

There were no elaborate secretariats, no hordes of experts, no booking of whole hotels to accommodate the hangers-on, no pens or inkstands of gold.

There was no need for any of these trappings. Two men from each country were to come and solemnly to sign. That was all. And Verney was to be there. It was realized by everybody that Verney, and Verney only, held together the naturally discordant elements of the group of Continental nations.

Once the First London Peace Pact was signed it would be different. Until it was signed all men looked on Paul Verney as the very figurehead of peace.

It was because of all this that on the 17th of March Dover, fit gateway of England for such a visitor, fluttered with flags.

Paul Verney, a slight and unobtrusive figure, landed with one secretary, his sole *entourage*, and was welcomed by the heir to the throne in person. Thousands of people, conscious that it was an historic occasion, lined the countryside to see their train go by; and England

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over the name of Verney and the text of the three proposals were on men's lips

Men at the head of industry said delightedly and almost incredulously to one another, "But, good Lord, have you seen what it's done already—the mere thought of peace for fifteen years? World trade's fairly jumping up . . ." Women looked at their children with a long and heavy horror lifted from their hearts. Everywhere doctors, scientists, and mathematicians turned with new eagerness to work which would not now be used to destroy. Up and down England men were already cutting the brushwood which in a week's time would blaze in triumph, and in the belfries wheels were being oiled, ropes inspected

And yet everywhere, born of many bitter disappointments in the past, there worked a tiny maggot of fear. "If it fails *this* time it will fail for good," men said

London gave a royal welcome to Verney. He received it as he received all tributes, in quiet modesty. No speeches were demanded from him, because of his doctor's express orders that he was to have as much rest as possible, or two years' grievous overstrain would take their toll. So, having driven to Clarence's Hotel in Mayfair, the least flamboyant but the most exclusive hotel in the world, he showed himself twice on the balcony to the cheering crowd, and was allowed to retire. Mighty London turned happily to its daily work again.

Paul Verney reached Clarence's Hotel at half-past five on the 17th of March. By a quarter to six the short preliminaries of instalment, including also his two mute appearances at his window, were over, and at the urgent request of his secretary he at once went to his bedroom to lie down. Clarence's made no fuss of him. That was

Clarence's way. Royal heads went in and out through its doors, and their wants were attended to, or not, according to the mood he happened to be in, by Walters, doyen of hall-porters. Walters was a personage and the day on which he sharply rebuked a princess of the blood for using bad language in his hall set the seal on his almost European fame.

Walters prided himself on knowing by sight everybody that mattered, and there is little doubt that he could have repeated whole pages of the *Almanach de Gotha* by heart; but even he was baffled by the thick-set and yet athletic-looking figure, clad in ancient tweeds and the father of all disreputable hats, that walked quietly into Clarence's towards seven o'clock.

"Tradesmen's entrance at the side," Walters said, and was instantly aware that he had committed the one classic howler of a long and honourable career. The other man's eyes, intensely black, gimlet-like eyes, fastened on Walters and made him feel uncomfortable.

"Edward Walters," the man recited impersonally, "aged fifty-seven. Illegitimate son of Mary Walters Living at twenty-eight Clarence's Mews Three children Left-handed. When off duty frequents the Running Footman No known weakness for women, but fond of betting You don't want me to take that round to the side-door, do you, Walters?"

Walters' feeling of disquiet had increased considerably. "My God, sir, no!" he stuttered

The shabbily dressed man permitted himself to smile. From his breast-pocket he drew out a small blue card, which Walters read with interest not untinged with apprehension.

"Scotland Yard, sir? I've very sorry, sir. I didn't know . . ."

The other man laughed. He had a wrinkled, kindly face which, for all the piercing keenness of those disconcerting eyes, made you instinctively trust him.

"That's all right, Walters. We can't all know everything."

Walters was recovering slightly. "You'll pardon me remarking it, sir, but you seem to know a good deal about me at the Yard. I didn't know that I had committed any crime——"

"Maybe you haven't, Walters—yet. But—who knows?—you may. And your job brings you into contact with a lot of interesting people. We like to know something about everybody at the Yard. You might be very useful to us some day."

"Just so, sir," said Walters, abashed once more. He was saved further shocks by the excited cry of none other than the *maitre d'hôtel* himself, who, with a demonstrativeness very unusual to him, came hurrying across the richly carpeted hall.

"Hallo, Farant! Glad to see you. How's the inn-keeping business?"

Henri Farant, prince of all *hôtehlers*, smiled good-naturedly at the jest. "Gentlemen must still put up somewhere," he said.

"At—what is it a day? Ten guineas, isn't it? It always interests me to know."

Henri Farant made a gesture. One did not discuss prices at Clarence's. The Colonel grinned. "Cunning little frog-eater!" he thought to himself, being John Bull enough to enjoy having a dig at a foreigner even when he liked him.

"Anyone been in or out?"

"Not a soul, sir."

"Mr Verney's resting, I believe."

"I dare say, sir."

The Colonel nodded; he liked laconic people. "The Press—Satan seize the whole boiling of 'em!—are coming at half-past eight," he said genially. "And not a mother's son of them is to go an inch beyond you, Wilson, without specific orders from me."

"Very good, sir."

The Colonel pressed the bell at the side of the door leading to the private suite of rooms, and it was answered in a moment or two by an alert-looking man of thirty-five or -six whom the Colonel already knew.

"Hallo, Stathers!"

The keen-looking young man smiled. "Ah! Good evening, Colonel. Come along in."

The Colonel duly went inside, and, the door being shut, Wilson seated himself once more and took up his somewhat boring task. The Colonel found himself in a small and tastefully decorated *foyer*, which he inspected with disarming frankness.

"Comfortable here?" he asked.

"Very, thanks," Stathers laughed. "You English pretend you don't know how to keep a hotel, but when you set out to do the thing you certainly do it in style."

"Mr Verney all right?"

"Yes, but tired. He's resting. The end of this week is bound to be pretty strenuous, and the doctor wants him to have as much rest as possible."

"Wise man! Well, I don't want to disturb him——"

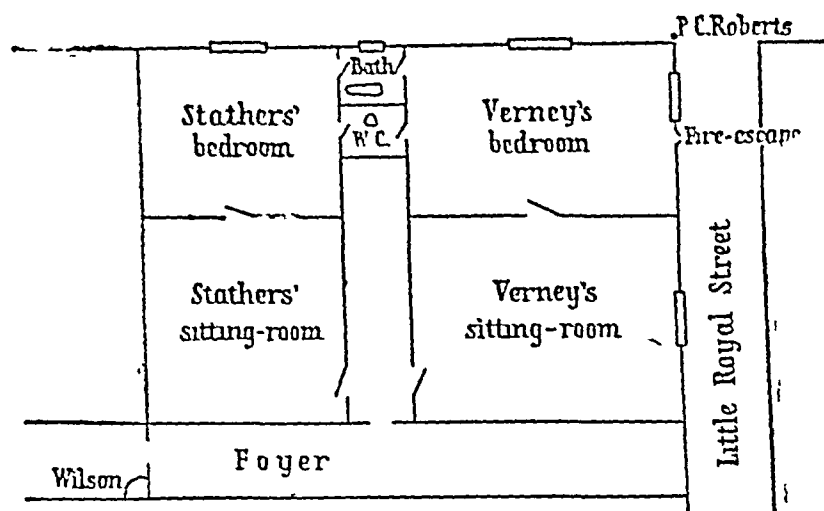
"But, Colonel, Mr Verney particularly asked that when you came I should call him"

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"Did he? Anything special?"

"Very special," Stathers answered, with a little bow—"the pleasure of meeting you."

The Colonel nodded "Go ahead, then. I'll not pretend that I'm not looking forward to it"



SKETCH OF THE CORNER OF CLARENCE'S HOTEL CONTAINING THE PRIVATE SUITE OCCUPIED BY PAUL VERNEY AND HIS SECRETARY

With another bow the young secretary left him and made his way through the door leading to the bedrooms.

Left to himself, the Colonel reflected that things were panning out nicely. He would see Verney, which he wanted to do, have a final word with Stathers and the invaluable Wilson about immediate arrangements, and still be in plenty of time to get to his club for dinner and then home to the pile of work which always awaited him. He reflected also that Stathers was a queer fish; spoke English perfectly without any trace of accent, and

yet was unmistakably un-English. Hard to say what he might be . . . a true cosmopolitan. . . . "Seems to be a longish time waking his chief up," thought the Colonel: and on the instant Stathers was back again rather more hurriedly than he had gone. The Colonel quickened at once to something in the man's eyes.

"Mr Verney all right?" he asked.

Stathers glanced at the *foyer* door to see that it was shut: then he said in a low voice and speaking very slowly, "Colonel, Mr Verney is not there."

"Not there?"

"No. He's gone."

The two men looked at each other for a moment in silence.

"You mean, he'll be back in a minute or two?" the Colonel asked.

"I mean, he has disappeared."

"He isn't in his bedroom?"

"He isn't anywhere, Colonel. There are only four rooms—a bedroom and a sitting-room for each of us, and, of course, a bathroom and lavatory arrangements I've been in them all, and they are all empty."

The Colonel sprang into action. It had always been an axiom of his when he wanted a thing to look for it himself. Followed by Stathers, he made his way through the second door, and went into all the rooms of the suite in turn. Then ended up in Verney's bedroom. Beyond themselves not a living thing was in the suite.

Stathers was growing more and more upset. "I was in my study, Colonel," he began explaining at a great rate, "and Mr Verney was in his bedroom, here, lying down, as I thought. If he wanted anything he had only to call, and I should have been with him in a minute."

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"You didn't hear anything?"

"Not a thing, until you rang the bell."

"How long had you been here?"

"Since about a quarter to six. When we came in Mr Verney had to show himself twice at the window to satisfy the crowd, but I didn't let him make a speech, and then we settled down just as I've described."

"And nobody came in?"

"Nobody."

"No telephone calls?"

"We haven't got a telephone up here purposely, or it would be ringing every minute."

The Colonel nodded, and looked round the sparsely furnished room. Some unopened *attaché*-cases lay on the table, and the bed had not been disturbed in any way.

"But, good God, Colonel," Stathers broke out, "I—I can't understand it. You don't think anything could have happened to him, do you?"

"Which window did he show himself at?" the Colonel asked.

"This one here." The agitated Stathers indicated the main window, outside which there was a little balcony facing Royal Street. Since the room was a corner one there was also a secondary window looking out over Little Royal Street, which was hardly more than a side-approach to the hotel. From this secondary window, which also had a small balcony outside it, the Colonel could see two things that interested him: half the back of his own admirable policeman, who stood statuesque at the junction of Royal Street and Little Royal Street, and the top of an iron fire-escape.

He stood there for a full minute looking out into the lamplit darkness, and when he turned to the room again

~~CHAPTER II~~

MEETING IN A FOG

A DISSOLUTE young gentleman of twenty-five swallowed his whisky-and-soda hastily, and, with a curt "Good night, everybody," to the unresponsive yokels, quitted the warm smoking-room of the Bay Horse for the unkindly darkness outside.

Graham Rivers' "Good night" elicited little in the way of response, firstly, because the natives of Essex are by nature splendidly inarticulate; and, secondly, because, like most slow-going people, they are fairly shrewd judges of character, and what they knew of Graham Rivers did not appeal to them.

"Lot of damned bumpkins!" young Rivers growled to himself as he made the best time he could with his suitcase along the dark lane. Graham Rivers suffered from two co-related diseases—a strong disinclination, amounting almost to a positive abhorrence, of any form of work and a rich father. At the age of twenty Graham had graced the medical school at a big London hospital with his presence, and two years later, having failed three times in his first M.B. examination, and standing in imminent danger, moreover, of being involved in a scandal with one of the nurses, he wisely decided that medicine was not his *métier*, and, as much to get him out of the way as for any other reason, his father decided that he should study for law.

A less likely candidate for legal honours it would be difficult to imagine, but at the price of a generous

allowance Graham consented to be dumped down in the remote village of By-Earsley, where a gentle-mannered, conscientious coach sought to cram a certain amount of knowledge into him.

By-Earsley had two great virtues in the eyes of Graham Rivers: firstly, he was his own master there, coming and going when he pleased, and cutting as much work as he chose, for his nervous tutor could always be put off by some preposterous tale of ill-health and, secondly, remote though the village was, it stood a bare mile and a half from Tong, through which fast trains ran to London.

It was towards the station at Tong that Rivers was now making his way round about ten minutes to seven on the evening of March the 17th. The fast evening train to Liverpool Street left Tong at 7.10, and as the Bay Horse was less than a mile along the station road Rivers felt that he had time in hand. Still, he did not dawdle, he was determined at all costs to catch the train. There are certain appetites which a man of Rivers' character finds it imperative to satisfy. He was therefore easily exasperated when without warning he walked into a belt of fairly dense fog. He knew from experience how curiously local the Essex fogs are, so that in that part of the country it is possible within a mile to have three dense patches and as many perfectly clear intervening spaces, and he went forward as best he could, hoping all the time to step suddenly into a clearer patch.

Instead of this he all but stepped suddenly into the off wing of a big touring car drawn awkwardly across what sketchy pretence of footpath the lane boasted. Except that he had only just avoided hurting himself against the totally unexpected obstacle, young Rivers

was sardonically amused at the plight of the car. He knew the road to Tong well, and he could see at a glance what had happened. Hereabouts the road—if one could dignify it by that name, for really it was little more than a narrow lane—turned almost through a right angle with the murderous abruptness only to be found in the English countryside, and, just to add completeness to the trap, at the very point of the turn stood the open entrance to a drive winding over grass-grown gravel to an empty and long-deserted house. Hence, even on clear nights, it was not an uncommon thing for motorists to find themselves a dozen yards along the gravel drive before they realized that something was amiss, and in a mist the mistake was almost inevitable.

Even as he stood there watching the efforts of the driver to reverse into the road Rivers noticed that, in true Essex fashion, the belt of mist was thinning as rapidly as it had thickened, and every second he could see the errant car and its occupants more clearly.

“Where the hell has this damned road gone to?” the driver called out irritably.

“You’ve run off it into a private drive,” Graham answered, and he noticed how the driver and the sharp-faced man by his side jerked their heads towards him, startled by the unexpectedness of his voice. “Come back a dozen yards, and you’ll be all right. Mind the old gate-post, though.”

He could see now that the car was a colossal Daimler, and, with the mist rapidly clearing, he noticed a detail that had hitherto escaped him—the window-blinds in the saloon part of the car were all drawn. He had hardly had time to note this curious fact, and to supply in imagination the sort of reason for it which appealed to

his particular kind of mind, when suddenly, due perhaps, to some lurch of the now slowly backward-moving car, the blind now two feet from his face flew up, and Rivers found himself staring into the interior of the Daimler.

What he saw knocked all his imaginings on the head there wasn't a single woman in the car. Instead there were three men, and for a full four seconds, quite unsuspected by them, Graham Rivers scrutinized the three strangers from that short distance.

One was a benevolent-looking man of middle age, who seemed to wear a perpetual smile on his face, and instinctively Rivers guessed him to be the head of the party. Opposite him sat a very different type—a heavy-jowled, coarse-looking man, with the strength of a bull in his massive shoulders; and between them, and evidently claiming all their interest, lay the third man.

Rivers saw his face clearly. It was drawn and white, and the eyes were shut. It looked like the face of a sick man, and in the moment of seeing that Rivers also saw that it was a face which was vaguely familiar. This thought had hardly run disturbingly through his head when the burly man realized that they were being overlooked, and, rapping out a guttural oath, jerked down the blind.

All this had taken about five seconds. Its suddenness and unexpectedness somewhat startled young Rivers and as the big car passed slowly in front of him, feeling its way back on to the main road, he called out to the driver, "Anything up?"

Once again he noticed how the driver and the man by his side looked at him with something like suspicion in their eyes.

"Anything wrong?" he asked "That chap inside didn't look extra good"

The driver mumbled something surly under his breath, and, feeling the hard road under him once more, he gave a savage jerk to the steering-wheel, and in a *crescendo* of controlled noise the big car gathered speed down the dark lane

Young Rivers stared after it for a moment or two, and then, realizing that he had none too much time left, shrugged his shoulders, and started off for the station again

The big Daimler had not gone a hundred yards round the bend in the lane before the benevolent-looking man inside picked up the speaking-tube and said a single word down it in his soft voice. In instant obedience the driver pulled up and waited.

The massively built man raised his eyebrows inquiringly

"That young man saw us," the quiet voice said.

"Do you think he saw—*him*, Doctor?"

"I am sure of it"

"Did he recognize him?"

"I'm rather inclined to think he did; he stared hard enough.

"Hell! If it hadn't been for this cursed belt of fog we would have been all right When the young fool sees the evening papers he may make trouble."

The one addressed as "Doctor" smiled If it had not been for a cold fanaticism lighting up the pale eyes, it might have been mistaken for the kindly smile of a tolerant man

"He must not be allowed to make trouble, my friend," he said quietly.

The other grinned, and said, with a sort of ferocious geniality, "We could soon find a way to stop his mouth if we can only reverse in this damned lane."

"Don't be a fool, Lodder!" the Doctor rapped out "This fog has made us lose enough time as it is, and in any case we don't want to leave more clues than necessary behind us."

Lodder shrugged his great shoulders. The Doctor was the only man in the world from whom he took a rebuke, and even from him he took it ill.

"What then?" he asked.

"We can spare Bauer. He must follow the boy, and keep an eye on him. Maybe he didn't recognize anyone; then no harm is done. But Bauer must watch him for twenty-four hours, and if he does anything to incommode us, then we can act."

"As you like, Doctor. Personally, I don't think there's much risk——"

"My friend, we are not taking any risks. Tell Bauer." The Doctor fixed his pale eyes on Lodder and after a second's silent conflict of wills the big man turned, opened the door, and, as though he were addressing a dog, called, "Bauer!"

The man sitting by the driver jumped down with alacrity, and, standing respectfully at the open door of the car, took his orders from that quiet voice of the kindly looking gentleman, whom he feared more than anyone else in the world.

Graham Rivers caught the 7.10 with a minute or two to spare. He was not an especially observant young man, and, even if he had been, it is doubtful whether he would have known that for the last three-quarters of a

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mile to Tong Station some one was following him along the dark road. The man who followed Rivers was an expert at the game, and as the young rake sank into the corner seat of his third smoker and prepared to enjoy his evening paper he was blissfully unaware that only five inches of wood and upholstery separated him from some one who was taking a flattering interest in all his doings.

Rivers lit a cigarette, and spent a contented minute or two speculating on the delights of an evening in Town; then as the train speeded up and the darkness, studded with twinkling lights, began to slip by he opened his evening paper and prepared to while away eighty boring minutes. And the first thing he saw made him sit up.

"The Peacemaker arrives in London," ran the caption, and underneath Rivers stared at a photograph which suddenly explained why the face in the car had seemed so familiar.

"Rum go!" he said to himself after a while. "Well, if it wasn't this Verney cove it was his spit image." And, relegating such matters to their proper sphere of unimportance, he turned impatiently to the sporting page.

CHAPTER III

"WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED"

IN spite of occasional patches of fog Liverpool Street was reached dead on time, and Graham Rivers, forgetting all about half-recognized faces in cars, threw his paper untidily to the floor of the carriage and, suitcase in hand, jumped out on to the crowded platform. He moved so quickly that a less experienced 'trailer' than Bauer might have had difficulty in keeping in touch; but the sharp-faced little man knew the tricks of the trade backward, and when Rivers jumped into a taxi with a "Windsor Chambers, Marble Arch," flung to the driver Bauer was already opening the door of the taxi behind, confident that he was unobserved.

Rivers disappeared into Windsor Chambers at a great speed, and his hurry caused the conscientious Bauer a few minutes' unnecessary apprehension. It was the hurry simply of a young man with money to burn, anxious to see the lights of Piccadilly round him to help him burn it.

Two minutes' guardedly innocent talk with the porter elicited the information that Windsor Chambers consisted of single-bed sitting-rooms let to gentlemen who wished to spend a night or two in Town. Somewhat reassured by this Bauer took up an unobtrusive position on the other side of the road, and prepared to put the second half of his orders into execution.

This was made easy for him by the fact that a telephone call-box stood almost directly opposite the entrance to the Chambers. Grinning at his good luck,

“WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED”

Bauer stepped into the box, and with one eye on Windsor Chambers dialled for his number

A woman seated in the warm and scented bedroom of a flat not half a mile away, across the myriad roofs of London, lazily picked up her receiver in response

Had a stranger overheard the opening sentences of their conversation he might have been puzzled by them. Although Bauer knew well enough the rich voice that greeted him with an incurious “Hallo!” he was taking no chances

“Something comes from the East,” he said. The answer came quietly, “We await its coming”; and each knew that he was speaking to one of the Assembly.

“That you, Hilda? Bauer here”

The woman’s full lips twisted into a contemptuous smile. She despised foxy-faced little Bauer, she was after bigger game than Bauer, but, as a mouthpiece of somebody else’s orders, he had to be respected.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“The Doctor wants you to keep an eye on an interfering young fool to-night.”

“Interfering?”

“Well, he may interfere. We don’t know we daren’t risk it.”

“Where are you?”

“Humphrey Street, Marble Arch. Opposite Windsor Chambers. There’s a public call-box here, I’m in it now. I’ll meet you here”

“When?”

“As soon as you like. You’d better hurry”

The woman was putting the receiver down angrily; she disliked being told by Bauer to hurry. But there was one question she wanted answered

"Is Lodder in Town?" she asked carelessly, and instantly bit her lip at the tiny chuckle that greeted the question.

"Not to-night, my dear. Business this evening."

Bauer was grinning as he came out of the telephone call-box; he enjoyed poking his foxy nose into matters that were not his concern. He lit a cigarette, and leaned in the shadows watching and waiting.

Ten minutes had gone by since Rivers ran up the steps of Windsor Chambers, and at the end of another ten minutes Bauer was joined in his vigil by the woman. Humphrey Street is a busy place, as are most of the streets radiating from that spate of incessant bustle, Marble Arch; pedestrians and traffic throng it uninterruptedly. A man and woman talking in the shadows were noticed by nobody.

"He's still there," Bauer said. "Changing, I suppose."

"What have I got to do?"

"Get hold of him if you can. At any rate, keep an eye on him. The point is he mustn't say anything about——" The cautious Bauer gave a significant jerk of his head, and the woman nodded.

"Does he know anything?" she asked.

"Personally, I don't believe he as much as guesses anything, but you know what the Doctor is. I shall be with Carl if you want me—— Look out!" They both watched while young Rivers appeared in the lighted doorway of Windsor Chambers and waited for the porter to secure a taxi; but the efficient Bauer did not waste the interim. With a gesture of his hand he had already engaged a second cab; and the door no sooner slammed behind Graham Rivers than the woman was taking three quick steps across the pavement and Bauer was

instructing the driver "You see that taxi just leaving Windsor Chambers? Follow it."

"Very good, sir"

Young Rivers paid off his cab outside Swan and Edgar's in Piccadilly Circus, and, standing there on the pavement, amid the very maelstrom of humanity, looked around him approvingly.

The Royal rockets soared and fell in multicoloured regularity, the Guinness clock announced a red 95; across the illuminated newspaper ran a snake of letters and figures, cricket news from some far-distant corner of the world the very earth shook with the surge and thunder of the incessant traffic; and in the middle, under dainty Eros, sat immobile a many-coated, ruddy-faced figure, and beside her, pathetically incongruous in that hard and glittering setting, a huge basket of flowers.

Young Rivers, taking it all in, smiled. The centre of the centre of the world, with all its blatant vulgarity, all its callous inhumanity, pleased him as it had pleased many and many another young man before. He looked upon it and thought it good, as though it were some gigantic coloured sideshow run for his especial amusement and delectation.

Lighting a cigarette, he began to stroll slowly up Regent Street. He had not gone many yards before he saw somebody he knew, and, dodging across the crowded pavement, he gave a familiar slap to an admirably tailored shoulder. "Hallo, Berkley!" he cried.

George Stanhope Berkley, one of the richest young men in the West End of London, affected surprise. Actually out of the corner of an unusually observant eye he had spotted Graham Rivers in the offing, and had

hoped to escape without being greeted. Although they had both gone to the same school, they had since travelled very divergent paths.

George Berkley was spare and fit and well kept. He enjoyed so much of the social life of London that people thought he must be dissipated and soft, ignorant of the fact that one evening a week was unfailingly consecrated to a tiny gymnasium in the Marylebone Road, where, sometimes with his own faithful servant Clarke, sometimes with a rising pugilistic hope of the district, George corrected all the follies of the week by a strenuous hour in the roped square.

George did not care for Graham Rivers, not for Graham Rivers' outlook on life, but, being a genial soul, he could not bring himself to be definitely rude, and at the younger man's greeting he turned round and without much enthusiasm answered, "Hallo, Rivers!"

"Just the man I wanted to see."

"You flatter me."

"What about looking in at Batty's or somewhere for a spot of something before dinner?"

"Sorry. No can do. I've got a job of work on hand."

"What—all this social rot?"

George nodded gravely. "All this social rot," he confirmed.

It was one of the major puzzles of Graham Rivers' life that anyone should beliberately seek work. That a man with George Stanhope Berkley's reputed income should do so seemed nothing short of fantastic. Had he known in addition, that the not inconsiderable payment that George received for his labours was handed without any deduction whatsoever to a hostel for down-and-outs run by an overworked and very grateful *padre* in the East

"WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED"

End, he would have considered it a clear case of certifiable lunacy. But George was made that way—he could not be happy doing nothing, and when, one fine spring morning, the editor of a famous weekly paper, sitting next to him at a luncheon at the Ritz, said, "Mr Berkley, you're always going about and meeting everybody in Mayfair. Couldn't you do something for us—a column or so—each week? I don't want the usual sloppy stuff, but interesting, sensible chatter done with just a suspicion of the tongue in the cheek", when this suggestion was made to George he jumped at it. He had a certain facility with his pen, but, even more important for his particular job, he had *in excelsis* that gift of amusing camaraderie which put every one at their ease with him, and which made him *persona grata* with anyone from counts to costermongers, and from pugilists to prelates. Before long the "Current Chatter" column over the initials G S B, became quite a famous weekly feature; and George, to his quiet amusement, found himself besieged by publicity-mad people all anxious to be mentioned in it by name.

Even if he had not been going to a job at the moment he would have excused himself on that score to Rivers, not being anxious to have anything more to do with that young man than was necessary, but as it happened his excuse was valid, and he amplified it by telling Rivers exactly what his mission was.

Rivers seemed unexpectedly interested "Going to see this peace-dove merchant, eh?"

"If you care to describe him like that"

"Where?"

"At Clarence's—a hotel for gentlemen, not far from here. You may have heard of it."

Sarcasm had to be razor-edged to get below Rivers' well-tanned hide.

"You're sure this Verney bird is there?" he asked.

George Berkley was genuinely surprised. "What on earth makes you ask that?" he said. "Of course he is there. Where else would he be?"

Rivers laughed. "Nowhere, I suppose: only——"

"Only what?"

"—only I could swear blue I saw him or his twin brother, in a car just outside Tong not more than a couple of hours ago"

George surveyed the author of this wild statement critically. "The trouble with you, young man," he pronounced severely, "is that you're a sight too fond of looking on the vintage when 'tis ruby, as Mr George Rober used to say. You want to take a little more water with it, and a good deal more exercise. Now toddle off and enjoy yourself."

Rivers gave an objectionable smile. "I'm going to Im staying the night in Town"

"Where?"

"Usual place, Windsor Chambers. But—er—somehow I don't see myself spending much of the night there."

George nodded, and with a curt "Good night" went on his way. The more he saw of Graham Rivers the less he liked him: but, had he foreseen that that was the last occasion on which the two of them were to see each other alive, he might have been a trifle more gracious in his leave-taking.

Rivers, conscious of the none too friendly atmosphere smiled sardonically to himself as he resumed his stroll "Damned puritanical fool!" ran his thoughts. "Must be mad too. All the money in the world, and he goes

“WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED”

running round sweating blood on that ghastly job ” His thoughts were interrupted by something that prompted him to instant action Directly in front of him a lady’s bag, a slender affair of shining silver and black, dropped to the pavement

Young Rivers’ hand was there even before that of the errant bag owner, and he looked up into two dark and quizzical eyes

Those eyes quite blatantly announced the message that Graham Rivers had been looking for.

“Hal-lo! ” he said, smiling, and making a great business of returning the bag, and in response the full red lips twitched in a tantalizing smile

“Thank you so much! ” said a deep, intriguing voice, and Graham Rivers might be pardoned for not guessing that behind the dark, inviting eyes ran the contemptuous thought “The callow young fool! ”

“You look frightfully lonely,” he said.

“Do I?”

“What about a spot of dinner together? ”

“That would be lovely! ”

The young man’s hand shot up to detain a cruising taxi, and with a great display of gallantry, he followed his prize into its dark interior.

“Just what the doctor ordered,” was his delighted reflection as the flag clicked down, and they sped towards his chosen restaurant and towards grim Destiny.

CHAPTER IV

TWO AND TWO TOGETHER

GEORGE dismissed Graham Rivers from his mind immediately after parting from him, and hastened with enjoyable anticipation towards Clarence's. It was usual for him to enjoy his work. The lengths of abject self-abasement to which people would go in order to secure two lines of printed publicity amused and faintly nauseated him, and he liked every now and again, as a wholesome corrective, to get out into the crowded streets and brush shoulders with ordinary humble, human folk, whose names would never by any chance appear in any paper, and who didn't lose a wink of sleep because of it.

But this evening he knew to be different. He was genuinely looking forward with something not far removed from awe to seeing in the flesh the legendary Paul Verney. A new spirit was stirring through Europe, and George was full of respectful curiosity to see the man who was its inspiration and essence.

In the hall of Clarence's he found seven or eight other men talking and waiting. He knew all of them by sight, and all, save one or two, pretty intimately. Big, Roman-nosed, gaunt-looking Spender, the *doyen* of Fleet Street correspondents, overshadowed the group physically and spiritually. Spender had been in strange corners of the world, and had seen strange things. His only requisites for starting off to the ends of the earth were sufficient time to buy a tin of the vilely strong tobacco that he

smoked incessantly and sufficient money to bribe some easy-going tramp skipper to sign him on as a deck-hand. Among other jobs he had followed the fortunes of seven separate wars in various parts of the world, and, hard as hickory though he was, inside and out, John Spender had had his fill of warfare. His seven campaigns had made him a hardened pacifist. Next to him, and in amusing contrast to his wild appearance, stood dapper little West of *The Times*, and round them were grouped the other representatives of the Fourth Estate.

When George entered and passed Walters' vigilant eye John Spender was dominating them all. No amount of hard knocks had killed the capability for boyish enthusiasm in Spender, and he was heart and soul for the business that had brought them there that evening. Nor was there any stony ground among his audience. Fleet Street has ever its finger on the pulse of mankind, its ear to the ground in supersensitive anticipation, and almost unconsciously it responds with uncanny quickness to any great moving of public opinion.

Spender broke off what he was saying when he spied George, and with a grin of welcome, for the two liked each other, cried, "Come on, young Berkley! You're late." Amid the remnants of the talk that had been going forward, and the good-natured chaff which flies fast and furious wherever newspaper men are gathered together the world over, they made their way towards the lifts.

Each had an official Press pass, but it was unnecessary to use these, for lynx-eyed Wilson, at the door of the private suite, knew them all, and as each man filed by him that admirable precisionist ticked off a name on the typed list in his hand

"If you don't knock off for a bit, my lad, you'll be in for a dose of what your chief has got."

The Colonel, immobile in his corner, felt a good deal easier when John Spender jumped to his feet, and on behalf of his colleagues sent a message of sympathy to the sick man. He assured the secretary that they all realized the tremendous amount of work which Mr Verney had accomplished in the months just passed and the last thing in the world they wanted to do was embarrass him in any way by making unreasonable demands.

There was general and emphasized assent to this, and Fleet Street, robbed of what it had wanted, and yet hugging the precious verbatim message as a good second best, took its leave.

One and one make two. The bread is delivered daily at your door, dynasties rise and fall, the very world revolves on its axis in space, because of that tremendous fact. One by itself is a mere unit, another one but another unit, yet together they make two, the first step in a series.

George Berkley, during the brief interview in the sitting-room was impressed by nothing more than by the nervousness of secretary Stathers. George had a habit of looking at the eyes of any man who spoke to him, and the eyes of the neat and smooth-tongued secretary did not impress him at all favourably. "Looks as though he's finding the wicket a bit sticky," thought George, and instantly there flashed to his recollection the fact which he had already almost forgotten, the chance sentence of young Graham Rivers, which had seemed such arrant nonsense at the time, which still seemed nonsensical, and yet which had been spoken with such assurance.

TWO AND TWO TOGETHER

Together the two things linked up in George's inquiring mind with an almost audible click, and he started to wonder. It was all fantastic and incredible and inexplicable, but, for all that, George wondered . .

In the hall he managed to be the last of his party, and he neatly transferred himself to an ascending lift without any of the other Press-men being aware of it.

Wilson was mildly surprised at his return, but he obligingly rang the bell, and handed George's card to Stathers when he in due course opened the door.

The card was for the Colonel, who received it with a non-committal grunt.

GEORGE STANHOPE BERKLEY

7A Jervyne Street

Mayfair

its legend ran. The Colonel considered this for half a minute in silence, then he turned it over and studied the one word "Urgent" pencilled on its back. For another thirty seconds he kept silent, thinking.

The Colonel liked young Berkley. To start with, he had been at Harrow with the young man's distinguished father. And in addition to that five years ago Fate had thrown them together in an exciting business, in which George had acquitted himself manfully. On the other hand, since then the young man had taken up this idiotic social-column stuff. He was now one of the Press, and the Colonel disliked the Press. He turned the card over in his hand.

"We've staved 'em off for a bit, Stathers," he said at length. "It's given us time for a breather, anyway."

"It's a respite, Colonel, but what the devil do we do next?"

The Colonel never wasted time trying to answer questions which were beyond him. A trifle abruptly he asked, "What does this young firebrand want?"

"I don't know. He merely asked me to give you his card. He said you would know him."

A suspicion of a smile played over the strong, determined face. "Oh, I know him all right. But what does he want? That's the point. Nothing can have leaked out, can it?"

The two men looked at each other for a second or two in silence, neither completely at his ease.

"You'd better bring him in," the Colonel said in sudden decision.

George entered, grinning cheerfully, and seated himself uninvited. "Good evening, sir," he said pleasantly.

"What do you want, young Berkley?"

"Just to say how sorry I am. Mr Verney is in his room, ill."

"Very good of you."

"I suppose he is ill—in his room?" George added innocently, and his eyes were fixed, not on the Colonel, but on secretary Stathers, nor did they fail to notice the sudden and instantly corrected glance of apprehension which that overtired person shot towards the grim figure in the corner. George's pulses quickened when he saw that glance. He felt sure that he was not after a complete mare's-nest after all. There was something here, perhaps something big, and he meant to get wind of it.

The Colonel's face was immobile, but inwardly he raged. He knew Stathers was letting him down. "If a secretary isn't a damned good liar, what's the use of him?" he thought bitterly. Aloud he said, with every

show of solicitude, "Mi Stathers, you'd better go and see if Mi Verney wants anything. When I have dealt with Mr Berkley here I'll show him out."

Nothing loath, the secretary took the chance of escaping to the bedroom, where his chief should have been, and wasn't.

"Now, young George Berkley," the Colonel said, in a much less formal tone of voice. "what the dickens do you really want?"

George felt that he held the aces, and he could afford to play for time a bit. "I am full of solicitude for Mr Verney," he answered.

"Drop that rot and come down to brass tacks! You've got some bug biting you. What is it?"

"Well, naturally, I want something for my paper."

"You've got all you'll get for your paper."

"Aren't you going to tell us something about Mr Verney's motor-ride this evening?"

The Colonel's eyes were not those of Stathers; the closest scrutiny of them failed to detect any answering glimmer to this *ballon d'essai*.

"Most of you newspaper people are mad," he said, "but you appear to be deaf and blind as well. Everybody knows that Mr Verney came straight here from Victoria at about half-past five, and that he hasn't been anywhere since."

"That official, is it?"

"Cast-iron official."

George nodded. "I see." He rose to go. For a man of something over sixty the Colonel could on occasions move with disconcerting rapidity. He was out of the corner barring his visitor's way in a flash.

"Where are you off to, George?"

George hesitated. It is sometimes a little difficult to know when to play out your ace of trumps, but on the whole he decided that the moment had arrived.

"Only to my paper, to tell them that the man who saw Paul Verney in a motor-car near Tong about two and a half hours ago must have been mistaken, that's all."

A silence followed that remark. Though he tried not to show it, the Colonel, for the moment, had the wind taken completely out of his sails.

"So, if you don't mind, sir, I'll be getting along."

'At the moment, George Berkley, you are under preventive arrest, so stop playing the fool. You know something, and you're going to tell me what it is."

George nodded brightly. "Quite right, sir, I do know something, and, moreover, I am going to tell you what it is—on one condition."

"Namely?"

"That you spill the beans as well. I know there's something under the surface here, and I want to come in on it. You tell me the truth about Verney, sir, and I'll tell you all I know."

The Colonel considered for a moment. He knew that the man he was talking to was as loyal an Englishman as could be found in the realm, and he knew that he could trust him. It even came into his head that a young man who could hold him own in a scrap, and who sought adventure, might come in useful in whatever strange game lay ahead.

"I'll tell you the truth on one condition," he said. "that you give me your word not to breathe a syllable of what I am going to say to a soul until I tell you you can."

"Right-o!"

"You've got to forget you're mixed up with the damned Press, George."

"Curse the Press!" George said heartily.

"Well, here's the truth—Paul Verney isn't in his bedroom, he isn't in the hotel. We don't know where he is. He disappeared from here somewhere between about five-forty-five and seven-fifteen."

George whistled. "You mean, you don't know where Verney is?"

"Not an idea."

"Good Lord! I thought he had simply gone down to a country house for the week-end, and you were trying to put us off the scent."

"I should be exceedingly obliged if some one would put me on the scent," the Colonel said grimly. "What's this tale of yours about Tong, or wherever it was?"

In a few words George recounted the substance of his brief conversation with Graham Rivers. The Colonel did him the honour of listening intently.

"Can you trust this Rivers person?"

"Not an inch, I imagine."

"I mean, his observation."

"I don't know. He seemed very sure about it, and every one in England has a pretty good idea of what Verney looks like by now, and, after all, there's no earthly reason for Rivers to make it up."

"No. True enough."

"I suppose it's just a chance there's something in it, sir?"

The Colonel nodded, and said more briskly, "Yes. And, believe me, we shall want all the chances we can get. Where is this Graham Rivers? Can you get hold of him?"

is mad—mad with the madness that the gods send to people whom they are about to destroy. Even the man in the street, guided by the wonderful instinct of the herd, guesses something of the extremity his world is in; men more behind the scenes, men in touch with the moods and passions of peoples all over the Western world, financiers with their fingers on the vital pulses of trade, could tell you how desperate that extremity has been. The fabric of Western civilization has been strained far past the danger-point, and—mark this!—collapse, if it came, would be a sudden, a catastrophic, and a final thing.

“God only knows, only God can guess, at the horrors which would be let loose in this Western world of ours if we were blind fools enough, under any pretext, to fly at one another’s throats again!

“Civilization lies sick, it lay a-dying until two years ago, when a man came to save it. I’ve never seen Paul Verney, but when I do quite soberly I believe I shall be looking on a saint. At any rate, he has worked miracles. This Peace Pact business is just about the biggest miracle that has ever happened in the world, and it’s the only miracle that can save the world.”

After a long silence George ventured to ask, “And it won’t—it can’t—go on without Verney?”

The Colonel shook his head vigorously. “No more than a four-in-hand without a driver will end up anywhere except in the ditch. It’s Verney himself, Verney’s personality, that has got all these nations together in London. They’re about as easy to handle as a lot of Mills bombs with the pins out, and if Verney isn’t there on the day some of them will find cause for complaint, you mark it. And if one boggles about signing the lot

"UP AGAINST IT"

will jib, and the whole thing will be off, and if *this* Peace Pact fails——"

"There might be another shot at one," George said, and the Colonel looked at him in a queer way. "After all," George went on, "nobody's going to benefit by kidnapping Verney, or anything like that, are they?" Again he saw that unusual look in the Colonel's glance, and if he hadn't known his man better he would have sworn that it was a look of fear.

"I'm not much of a hand at making speeches," the Colonel said slowly. "but I was rather pleased with my parable at the beginning of all this. You remember—about the rich old lady, and the doctor, and the villain of the piece? Well, we've talked about the rich old lady and the doctor, there still remains the villain."

George felt a curious quality in the silence that followed that remark, a quickening, a vitalizing, of the atmosphere, as though at last the fiddling had ceased and the curtain had gone up.

"Meaning?" he asked as casually as he could.

"Meaning that there is a man, or a group of men, who plot the death of the Western world, who want to murder civilization. Why?" The Colonel saw the query in George's eyes and laughed a little grimly. "I'll tell you why, my young friend. Because somewhere in the East there is a fanatic, with the ice-cold brain, the twisted vision, and the stupendous inhumanity of the wildest sort of fanaticism. And because under him and round him are the vultures, the lesser men who will batten on what is left when everything of value and good report in the Western world comes toppling down in ruins. Make no mistake about it, there are people

who hate the Western culture, and seek to wipe every vestige of it from the face of the earth."

"And you think that these people are concerned with the disappearance of Paul Verney?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid to think so. And yet I don't know. The man I have in mind is like some benevolent retired insurance broker to talk to; and in reality underneath the mask he is sheer cold, detached evil, as ruthless as a god—or a devil. If he has got hold of Verney we can pretty well put the shutters up."

"But where is this man? Is he in England?" George asked, and he was astonished at the sudden vehemence with which the Colonel thumped the arm of his chair, so that the dust flew, and cried "Ah if I knew that! He might be anywhere—in New York, in some forgotten town on the coast of the Black Sea, or here in London under my nose. I have had wind of him for two years and for two years over half the world I have thrown a net for him. I have got a system of communication so delicate that a man need only whisper something to his fellow in some bazaar in India, and if what he says is accompanied by the sign and the password it will be in our ears here in London, within forty-eight hours. But of the man I am after not a sight or sound, except once. One piece of information we did get a vital piece, and the man who got it for us died in the getting. Five years ago, as you know, because you were mixed up in the thing, one of the periodic visitations of unrest stirred the East, and there was talk of a mighty Deliverer to save them from the yoke of the oppressor—you know the sort of stuff. Junk, if you like, but, by God! junk with a kick in it."

George nodded.

"Well, we squashed that. We laid hands on the man who was to be the Inspired Deliverer, and in the final *mêlée* his symbol, the glittering Bluefeather, got smashed to atoms. You can't run a religious uprising without your prophet, and it seemed that the whole thing was dead. But this man of whom I speak did a wickedly cunning thing. He got hold of this Bluefeather idea and worked on it. He replaced the broken symbol, and deliberately fanned the embers of this dying religious fire, and directed it to his own ends; and his end is no less than the total destruction of Western civilization. We know that he has been at it for the last five years, probably far longer. The Bluefeather bogy is abroad again, and more dangerous than ever it was. Whoever is behind it must be a man of colossal wealth and with interests everywhere.

"If you keep your eyes open you will see traces of his work all round you. In your paper, for instance, especially in the Continental papers, paragraphs are constantly appearing deliberately designed to foster ill-will between nations. Suggestions are made about armaments, hints dropped about evasions, innuendoes put forward about hypocrisy just at a time, probably during some Conference or other, when even a breath of suspicion may do vital harm. Time and again we took up the question of such paragraphs with the papers in question, and almost invariably we would find that the offending lines—sometimes grossly offensive to some particular country—had gone in without the knowledge of the editor. They had been added by one of the linotype operators after the first format of the paper had been approved. True, the man often got the sack, but the harm was done. Half a million readers had seen

the paragraph and believed it. This happened so often, the paragraphs were such clever tissues of lies, and the occasions of their appearance so cunningly chosen that we began to be suspicious, and from being suspicious we got proof enough to make us certain. It was our friend of the Bluefeather at his work again. Each paragraph was a blow of the housebreaker's hammer against the none too secure walls of civilization. No wall, even the least secure, was ever knocked down by a single blow; but blow after blow, skilfully and incessantly repeated, will eventually bring down the stoutest wall.

"You remember the sudden crisis between this country and France three years ago—how suddenly, and inexplicably to the man in the street, diplomatic relations were broken off, and for three days we were on the verge of war?"

George nodded "I've often wondered what all the fuss was"

The Colonel laughed drily. "I'll tell you" At that time we had publicly given certain undertakings about armaments that our naval programme would not exceed certain specified limits. A King's Messenger went from London to Paris, taking on his person the details of the programme to which we had publicly pledged ourselves. It was contained in a communication to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs. The French Minister read through the memorandum with interest and when he had finished it he went white to the lips. Accompanying the memorandum, and looking for all the world as though it had been slipped into the official envelope by some colossal carelessness in Downing Street, was a letter purporting to be from the Chief Lord of the Admiralty;

to the Prime Minister, in which the whole set of official figures was openly scoffed at, and details given of the naval construction which would actually be carried out in secret.

"Of course, it was a fake; but I saw the letter myself, and, believe me, it was the cleverest fake in the world. How it got into the King's Messenger's dispatch-case between Downing Street and the Quai d'Orsay not one of us knows to this day. But that it was the work of our benevolent Bluefeather friend in the East, and a piece of diabolically skilful work at that, we all know for certain. Before now a lesser crisis than that has set Europe by the ears."

While George was thus having his eyes opened, and being made to feel that there was a good deal more exciting game to hunt in the world than the social lions of Mayfair, his name was on the lips of two people sitting intimately together over a secluded dining-table in an expensive restaurant not half a mile away.

As far as Graham Rivers could see the evening was proceeding swimmingly. The easy grace and complete self-possession of his *vis-à-vis* intrigued him no less than her queer type of beauty, and he kept assuring himself that he had picked a peach. It was not until the second bottle of wine had been broached, and a tongue, never conspicuous for restraint, had been loosened on the Rabelaisian side of geniality, that she decided the time was ripe to ask what was, for her, the most important question of the whole evening.

"Didn't I see you talking to a man in Regent Street just before you picked my bag up?" she asked.

Graham Rivers laughed. "Your bag wasn't the only

All this took place in the rather dingy hall, and was interrupted by the sudden shrillness of the telephone bell somewhere on the landing. The porter made a grimace. "Going all day and night, that thing. Knock on Mr Rivers' door, if you like, sir, and see if 'e 'as come back. No. 3, just on the left there." While the over-worked porter, grumbling under his breath, mounted the stairs to satisfy the insistent telephone George did as he was bidden, and took half a dozen steps along the hall, past an antique and forlorn-looking chair, to a door plainly marked "No. 3."

There was no answer when he knocked; and, feeling that a bed-sitter would be a more congenial place to wait in than the hall, which depressed him, he pushed open the door and, switching on the light, went inside.

It amused George to see how faithfully the room reflected the character of its occupant. It was unæsthetic to a degree, and as untidy as only a room can be after a mere male has changed in it in a hurry.

George lit a cigarette, and sat on the edge of the bed. He could hear upstairs, *diminuendo*, the aggrieved voice of the porter, who seemed to be having some trouble with his telephone call; and then suddenly his ears were pricked to meet another sound—the cautious opening and the very, very cautious shutting of the front door.

He wondered if Graham Rivers had arrived, and dismissed it as unlikely, for that young gentleman, he felt certain, would be a door-slammer 'by instinct. But whoever had arrived seemed to be in difficulties. There was a certain amount of shuffling, and after a pause, a curious dull noise somewhere between a thud and a grunt, as though a heavy burden had been set down, and some one was relieved by it.

George was glad that by accident he had not quite shut the bedroom door, for he found these noises intriguing. Almost immediately they were followed by carefully modulated voices. The first said imperatively, "No, leave the key here," and the second, complainingly, "We shall get hell over this when we get to Friday." George rose from the bed and took an undecided step towards the door. It was none of his business what practical jokes or other idiocies went on among the young men who frequented Windsor Chambers, but he had a mind to poke his head out and see what it was all about. He was stopped by the next sound, which was a titter in a shrill undertone, and which hadn't the faintest relationship to honest mirth. It was obscene and cowardly and cruel, and George began to think that he was not going to like this practical joke at all. Almost immediately the front door opened and shut again, and he took four quick strides across to the bedroom window. He was just in time to see men crossing the pavement to a waiting car. One he hardly distinguished at all, but for a moment the other's face was clear in the lamplight, a mean, narrow face, the head almost bald, the eyes set close together. "If that's the gent who titters," thought George, "I like the sight of him even less than the sound."

The car had hardly moved off before he heard the porter complaining loudly in the hall, and, dropping the curtain, he crossed the room again and went outside. "Ere's Mr Rivers, sir," he aggrieved porter greeted him—"and in a nice state."

George surveyed the scene in silence for a few seconds. Graham Rivers was there all right, huddled helplessly in the forlorn-looking chair, where he had obviously

been dumped by the two bright gentlemen who had just driven off

"Does he often come back like this?" George asked, distaste for any sort of besiality contending in him with pity for the stupidities of mankind

"Well, sir 'e isn't exactly a teetotaller, I do know that; but I've never seen 'im this bad before I can t see 'ow 'e got in 'ere I was upstairs trying to understand some fool of a woman on the telephone——"

"Two of his pals brought him in," George interrupted. "Come on! We'd better get the young fool undressed and in bed Lend a hand." He was thinking crossly that this meant a six hours' delay at least before anything approaching coherent information could be obtained, when, as he bent over the huddled form, something in the limpness of it frightened him

"Just a minute," he said in a quiet voice, and out of the corner of his eye he noticed the scared porter go white in the face.

George loosened Graham Rivers' clothing and laid a questing hand where a warm and vital heart-Beat should have reassured it Next he pulled back the horribly yielding head and examined the eyes Then he straightened himself up, and the thing in the chair sagged back into stillness.

"Well, he'll never get drunk again, poor devil!" George said grimly. "He's dead."

CHAPTER VII

A MESSAGE FROM BURTON MEWS

A full half-minute went by in silence. Outside there was the faint hooting of a taxicab, inside, in that badly lit and uncomfortable hall, silence.

George, glancing at the porter, saw something that made him like that disgruntled person less than ever. Scared out of his wits though the little man was, he was nevertheless beginning to gloat. Here was a fine, fat tragedy set down plump before him, which could involve him in no possible trouble, and yet provide him with sufficient news to be the hero of the hour to whatever circle was usually bored with his inanities in the local bar.

"Well, I can't say as I'm much surprised, sir," he said, "not all that much. Mr Rivers 'ere, 'e liked 'is drop, and that's a fact no one can deny, and there's many a man 'ad a stroke before now on top of taking a load too much. Alcoholic poisoning the coroner'll call it."

George said nothing. He didn't know much about Rivers, but all that he did know could be made to tend in the general direction of the porter's theory. It was possible, of course, for even a young man to have some sort of stroke on top of an over-hecktic evening, it was even possible for such an evening to lead to horseplay and practical jokes that might accidentally end up in tragedy.

"What about the two men who brought him in?" he asked.

"Well, she wouldn't exactly leave it, sir. But she rang up twice, said it was urgent. She said if you would be good enough to go round to"—the faithful ex-Marine produced a crumpled piece of paper from a most capacious pocket—"to Number twenty-six Burton Mews there'd be a message for you from Mr Graham Rivers"

Food and drink were now completely forgotten. George stared at his stolid henchman reflectively. If Graham Rivers had been the victim of foul play, and if before that foul play overtook him, being with friends, he had had the sense to do his best to get a message through about something that mattered, much might yet be made of what had threatened to peter out in a dead cold secret.

He was excited. "What time was all this, Clarke?" he asked.

Clarke scratched his head (one of the habits of which George could never cure him). "Well, sir," he made answer, "best part of an hour, might be an hour and a quarter ago, I suppose."

George pushed the little table away and jumped to his feet. "What was that address again?"

"Twenty-six Burton Mews, sir."

"Twenty-six Burton Mews. Right! Lord knows when I shall be back, Clarke. Don't wait up, but leave something hot in the thermos in case I come in at some ghastly hour."

"Very good, sir," Clarke answered, following his young master to the door. "Take care of yourself, sir."

George grinned. "Go to bed, you old sinner!" he said affectionately. "I'm going to enjoy myself."

He set off at a great pace, hopeful that the interview in Burton Mews would give him something tangible that

he could take on to the patiently waiting Colonel at Clarence's. He could not think of anything about which Graham Rivers would want to send him a message, except their chance meeting and conversation earlier in the evening, and the more he thought of this the more he hurried his steps to find out what that message was.

Although he had never actually been down Burton Mews in his life it happened that he knew where it was, since he went a good deal on foot in London, and had a knack of observing as he went. He remembered it as being a dark and unattractive turning leading off one of the side-turnings of South Audley Street, and thither he now hurried. The night had turned colder, and there was no moon, so that the circle of light thrown down by each lamp-post was like a bright oasis in a dark desert between the tall and stately houses of Mayfair. George loved his London. He loved the sights and smells and sounds of the great city, and he loved it in all its infinitely varying moods. He loved it then, as he went quickly along the almost deserted streets to what he felt sure was going to be an exciting interview.

He gained South Audley Street, and found the turning that he wanted, a short, dismal, and empty affair. Along this he walked more slowly, and for all his careful look-out so small was the entrance to Burton Mews that he passed it once without realizing the fact, and had to re-trace his steps.

He found it at last, a very narrow entrance between tall and shuttered houses, dark enough at the street end of it and apparently pitch-black at its further extremity. With some difficulty he was able to make out the numbers of the first houses on either side. They were one and two respectively.

"Numbered odd and even," he reflected, "starting from this end; so twenty-six will be some way along."

He set off along the dark Mews, thinking it the narrowest, most unattractive place he had ever come across. But that did not surprise him much, for he well knew how some people would pay a high rent for a pigsty if it had a Mayfair address; and how sometimes, indeed, the less inviting the mews the more attractive were the insides of the houses facing it.

No one was about, and the houses or garages or whatever they were on either hand seemed forlorn and deserted. Half-way down he nearly bumped into the lamp-post which should have illuminated that Stygian darkness; but its light was out, and its broken glass seemed appropriate in that place.

The numbers were steadily mounting, and he could just see enough to guess that the Mews was a *cul-de-sac*, and that he must be very near his goal, when with startling rapidity a piece of the general blackness at his side detached itself from its background and launched itself upon him.

As George turned instinctively to meet this danger he was aware, in the thousandth part of a second which is all the mind requires to realize such things, of a similar form menacing him from the other side. Simultaneously an excruciating pain shot through his left shoulder. Something hard and heavy had landed there with vicious force. It was, though he didn't know it at the time, a sand-bag, one of the most deadly and efficient weapons in the rough's whole armoury; and had it hit George, as it was intended to, in the nape of the neck his interest in the proceedings immediately subsequent would have been precisely nil. As it was, the blow

missed his head by less than an inch, and sent such a pain shooting through his shoulder that it seemed the bone must be on fire. There was no time for thought. The darkness seemed full of inimical bodies, and George hit out as hard and as fast as he could.

A dozen times in that first hectic minute he could have blessed the unpretentious gym. in the Marylebone Road where he had learned to look after himself as a man should. Out of the *mêlée* one of his assailants landed a useful left in George's mouth, and his lips were warmly moist at once with the blood that spouted out.

He kept his head, and fought inch by inch across the Mews, so as to get his back to a wall; and his attackers, realizing that their first assault had failed, redoubled their efforts. The very darkness helped George, for he had not to bother about whether he was hitting the right man or not. He hit anything he could see or feel, and hit it hard; and twice he grinned grimly as an extra savage jolt brought an answering grunt out of the darkness.

He was slowly but surely making his way to the wall when in desperation one of his attackers aimed a savage kick at his legs. The kick failed in its attempt to floor him, but the heavy boot, glancing off George's ankle, made him momentarily almost sick with pain, and with an involuntary cry he stumbled and pitched forward on to his knees. It was fortunate he did so, for a vicious body-blow swept harmlessly over his head, and the unlucky fist delivering it crashed mercilessly into the wall. An agonized shout told its own tale of smashed knuckles, and at the same time George struggled to his feet again.

The kick made him angry, angry with the stone-cold

anger which it is bad to raise in a man. Something barely glimpsed, or even, perhaps, some instinct, warned him that the essential split second was at hand, and, bunching his left fist, he put all his weight behind one smashing blow.

It went with mathematical precision straight to the point of his second assailant's chin, and the next noise George heard was the comforting one of the back of the man's head hitting the cobblestones.

That finished it. Footpad Number One was already nursing a useless right hand, and when his pal went down like a log the other man took to his heels without ceremony, and legged it as hard as he could go up the Mews.

George made no attempt to run after him; indeed, he was incapable of doing it. Instead he bent over the prostrate form on the ground and struck a match. The flickering spurt of light showed a roughly dressed man with a coarsened, unpleasant face suggestive of a decayed bruiser. George had never seen the man before, but he noted with pleasure that he had left his mark on him.

"He'll want more than a pound of beefsteak to cure that colour-scheme to-morrow," he reflected with satisfaction. He noticed, just before his match finally flared up and went out, that the man was already beginning to stir into consciousness.

George was undecided. He had had a bad pummeling, and for the present he felt in no shape to tackle anything fresh.

Straightening up, he walked unsteadily up to the top of the Mews and looked up and down the street. It was empty, neither friendly civilian nor comforting shape of policeman was in sight. George shrugged his

shoulders. He decided it would be useless going to find help, by the time he got back to the scene of the fight footpad Number Two would have vanished. What he wanted most was a drink and a chance of sitting down for ten minutes, and, turning down the Mews once again, he set about seeking both these desirable objects at No. 26. When he got to the place where he had been attacked there was no sign of the man he had knocked out. It was no more than he had expected. He knew by experience how soon the old bruiser type recovers from such a blow, and he had noticed at least two dark entries running off the Mews where a man could seek hiding in what was probably a labyrinth of yards and outhouses.

Well satisfied that his wallet and his watch were still his own, George repaired his dishevelled state as well as he could, and, with the reflection that one way and another he was having a night of it, knocked on the door of the very end house of the Mews, No. 26.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HEART OF MAYFAIR

AFTER a slight delay it was opened by a woman, and as she stood there, framed in the lighted doorway of the house, George momentarily caught his breath.

He was a connoisseur of beauty in women, and this woman, who was tall and dark, was beautiful beyond question. She was dressed for the evening in some affair of glittering silver which gave a barbaric touch that seemed perfectly appropriate.

For the first moment she was plainly disconcerted, and George, conscious of his dishevelled appearance, didn't wonder at it.

"Sorry to look like something off the remnant counter," he said, "but I'm George Berkley"

"*George Berkley*!"

"Yes—what's left of me"

The woman gave a curiously deep little laugh "Come in, Mr Berkley," she said "You appear to have met with an accident"

George followed her up a narrow staircase, through double doors at the top, into what was evidently the principal living-room of the house, and there, without further ceremony, he sat down gratefully in an easy-chair. In the soft light he was able to see better what a plight he was in. His shirt-front was soaked in blood from his cut lip, the knees of his trousers were muddied and torn, and there was a dirty patch on his left shoulder where the sand-bag had hit him. But already he was

"Graham was a friend of mine I met him—you don't mind plainness, do you?—in a way of business, and I liked him. This was six months ago—more, maybe I liked him, nothing more. I would have forgotten him by now, except that a queer thing happened—he fell in love with me" She looked at George almost defiantly for a second, and said, "Of course you haven't got to believe that, Mr Berkley, unless you want to, but there it is"

George, with a tiny bow, said that he found it the easiest thing in the whole wide world to believe.

"Well, there it was," she continued "I no more loved Graham than I love you, and I told him so. But he was infatuated about me—there is no other word for it—and infatuated men are a nuisance He was always coming here, which was awkward, and he kept begging me to marry him, which was absurd—absurd for several reasons. For one thing Graham had no money. When he had spent his quarter's allowance in one gorgeous burst he was as poor as a church mouse till next quarter-day"

George nodded. The financial details seemed fairly well in accord with what he knew of Graham Rivers.

"But the fact that it was absurd didn't worry Graham I got tired of him and his persistence, and we had rows I am pretty downright and practical myself, but he wouldn't see sense. He would come here, and he would make scenes. He begged me to have dinner with him to-night, and I agreed if he would promise to take it as a final good-bye Of course, during dinner he started all over again, and worse than ever, and when we came back here we had the worst scene we have ever had. I lost my temper, and told him a few home-truths, and he swore that if I didn't ring him up to-morrow and say I would marry him he would kill himself"

George's eyes were opened wide at this extraordinary yet illuminating narrative. "But how on earth do I come into it?" he asked

"When Graham left me I was angry with him because he is a fool, but at the same time there is something I like about the boy, and I certainly don't want him to go and do anything stupid because of me. And I was more than half frightened that he meant what he said. During dinner he mentioned you once or twice, and said that he had seen you earlier this evening; and since I was thoroughly scared, after my temper left me, that he would do what he said I wanted to get hold of some man friend of his who would go round and stop him being such an unutterable fool."

George nodded. A curious thing, he thought, not for the first time, but the poor, wretched writer of a social column somehow gets let in for more extraordinary jobs in a week than anybody else even hears of in a year. What he had just been told hung together perfectly. It would certainly explain Graham Rivers' death, and it seemed to fit the psychological probabilities as well as the material facts; and yet——

George himself wondered what was the cause of the stubborn little scruple which kept troubling his mind, refusing somehow to be absolutely satisfied.

"You are not inclined to help him?" the woman broke in on his thoughts

George looked up quickly at those dark eyes. They met his in a level gaze, steadily, and without sign of wavering, and it was only for a fleeting instant that the thought flashed across his mind that they might be mocking him.

"I can't help him," he answered.

"You can't? Why not?"

"Because Graham Rivers is already dead."

Those queer, inscrutable eyes lost nothing of their steadiness; they even seemed to gain in intensity. "So" the woman said quietly, "you have seen him, then?"

"Yes"

"Where?"

"At his rooms, not an hour ago"

The woman was evidently astonished. "What brought you—— What a strange coincidence that you should have been at his rooms to-night!" she cried

"Yes," George agreed slowly, and inwardly he wondered what other strange coincidences—if that was the right word—the evening would bring forth

"Was Graham Rivers alone?" the woman asked

"No Two men brought him there"

"Did you see them?"

"No," George lied, on the general principle of keeping a card or two up his sleeve The woman's eyes were fixed steadily on him, and he was not sorry when their scrutiny was interrupted by the ringing of an electric bell.

It rang as though in a deliberate rhythm—one long *brrr* followed by two short ones, then one long and two short again.

The woman rose gracefully from her chair. "Will you excuse me," she begged, "while I see who that is?" And George, rising as she left the room, wondered that in so expensively decorated a house there should be no maid to answer the door.

The woman shut the door of the drawing-room carefully behind her, and went quickly to the door facing Mount Street. As soon as she opened it a man with his

coat-collar turned up about his ears and a soft hat pulled well down over his eyes came swiftly in. He would have spoken at once, but the woman warned him with a finger laid to her painted lips, and, motioning him to follow her, she led the way into a tiny room leading off the entrance-hall.

Here the newcomer turned down his coat-collar and threw the hat off his head. He was an alert-looking young man of thirty-five or -six. His face was pale, and he was evidently nervous.

She said at once, "Things have gone wrong," and his nervousness was plainly increased. He had every appearance of a man who is in some business against his will, and who has little enough relish for it.

"Wrong?" he asked. "Why? How?"

"That young Berkley is here."

"George Berkley *here*?"

"Yes."

The man's eyes flickered uneasily. "What brings him here?" he asked.

"I brought him here."

"In God's name, what do you mean, Hilda?" the man broke out. "I knew this business would miscarry."

"Quietly!" the woman warned him. "Everything will be all right if we keep our heads. Bauer rang me up with orders to watch a young fool called Rivers."

"Rivers? I've never heard of him."

"No. He's nobody, but he happened to see something to-night at Tong which no one was meant to see."

"Good God!"

"Keep calm! There's no harm done—yet. I met him, as he thought, by accident this evening, and had no difficulty. He was fruit ripe for picking. He took me out

to dinner, and I began to think that there would be no danger from him until he happened to mention that he saw George Berkley in Regent street this evening—I had seen him speak to a man, but I didn't know who the man was—and that he had told him what he had seen at Tong. Then I knew there might indeed be danger, not from Rivers, but from this other man, Berkley. I thought Rivers was best out of the way for a bit, so I brought him back here; and when I mixed him a drink I slipped one of the Doctor's powders into it."

"Well?"

"Well, we must ask the Doctor to prescribe something less drastic, for it killed him."

"My God! Is he here now?"

"No. At first I thought it had merely acted as it should do, and put him nicely to sleep, but he had a sort of a stroke, and died. He looked as though he lived a pretty wild sort of life, and I dare say his heart was weak."

"In Heaven's name, what did you do with him?"

"What could I do? To keep him here meant eventually an inquest and inquiries. He had told me where he was staying, and when I got over the shock of the thing I rang up Bauer—he was with Carl. They did the only thing possible. They put him into the back of Bauer's car, and took him to his rooms somewhere near the Marble Arch. I arranged to ring up the place exactly at half-past ten, so as to get the porter, if there was one, out of the way, and they opened the door with the young fool's key, put him in the hall, and came out."

"And Berkley?"

"I didn't know how much importance he would attach to what young Rivers had told him or what he

would do about it, but Bauer thought it was too dangerous to leave him, and so we concocted a plan. I rang up his house, and left a message that Graham Rivers had something to tell him if he would come here by the back entrance along the Mews. Meanwhile Bauer got two of his cronies from Paddington—real beauties, according to him, men who would fight their own fathers for a couple of pounds—and they were to put Berkley out of the way for a bit. They smashed the 'amp in the Mews and waited, and when he came they made a mess of it."

"You mean, they didn't attack him?"

"They attacked, and bungled it. Berkley gave better than he got, and, like all the men that fool Bauer ever employs, they were arrant cowards at heart. When he showed fight they turned and ran."

"And does Berkley know who they were?"

"Of course not!" the woman answered sharply. "How could he? For all he knows they were a couple of ordinary footpads after his wallet or watch. But——"

"But what?"

"Berkley knows that Graham Rivers is dead. He was at Rivers' rooms in Windsor Chambers when Carl and Bauer took him there."

"And what was he doing there?"

The woman's dark eyes narrowed. "I wonder," she said slowly. "Maybe Mr George Berkley is more interested in what that other young fool told him than we think. In any case, he already knows enough to be dangerous if he starts putting two and two together."

"He must be stopped putting two and two together."

The woman smiled derisively. "Undoubtedly. And who is going to do it? Would you care to go into the drawing-room now and take him on in a pitched fight?"

The man flushed. He was well aware of physical weakness, and references to it, especially from women always caught him on the raw.

"Don't be silly!" he said testily. "You and Bauer have bungled the business between you, and if we are not careful we shall make it worse. What is done now must be decisive."

"And what is to be done?"

"I think I have a plan."

"Pray God it is better than Bauer's!"

"It depends on you."

The woman's lips twitched. In her experience men's carefully concocted plans always did depend, in the ultimate analysis, on a woman.

"Can you get young Berkley here some time to-morrow—say, for lunch?"

"Maybe."

"Where are Carl and Bauer?"

"They left for the Doctor's place in Carl's car about ten."

"You must ring them up. They must be here too. This time we must make no mistake."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime I will look after Mr George Berkley. Which way will he leave this house?"

"By the front, I imagine, after his experience getting here."

The man nodded and with a few final words of advice and warning took his leave. His last sentence to the woman was the most passionate and sincere one he had spoken all the evening. "I wish to God I was clear of all this!" he said vehemently; and at once she found courage for him.

"Well, you are not clear of it," she answered almost fiercely. "You're in it with the rest of us. It's sink or swim now, and we're not going to sink."

Left to his own devices for a while, George wandered round the blue-and-silver room, inspecting it somewhat more carefully. The more he saw of it—its furniture, pictures, and ornaments—the more respect he felt for the taste that had planned the *ensemble*, and the more intrigued he became by the whole situation.

He felt as though he were looking down a kaleidoscope: he could see pretty things in plenty, but as yet they meant nothing. One twist of the wheel, and they would all fall suddenly into some geometrical and correlated whole—a pattern, and George had a fancy to see what that pattern might be.

He took a vow that by hook or by crook he would pay another visit in the near future to the house in Burton Mews to see what further surprises it had in store for him.

His wanderings round the room brought him back to the fireplace, where a cheery blaze was thrown out from a crackling fire of wood. Above, on the narrow mantelshelf, were two ornaments of the more bizarre sort, and propped up against one of them was an envelope. George glanced at it, because he suddenly realized that as yet he did not know the name of his hostess.

MADAME KYATT
26 Burton Mews
Mayfair
London, W.

the address ran "Curious name, Kyatt," he thought. It sounded foreign and yet the woman herself had

given no trace of foreign origin, except, perhaps, in the somewhat exotic atmosphere that surrounded her.

Then something else about that innocent envelope caught his attention. He had just time to verify it, and to turn away again pretending to give his attention to something else, when the door opened quietly and the woman, all apologies came back into the room.

George turned to greet her with added interest. Another coloured piece had been thrown into the kaleidoscope, for the envelope on the mantelshelf bore the postmark "Tong."

He made light of having been left alone, but on the whole he was glad when the woman suggested that he must be tired out and want to go home. He had indeed had enough, mentally and physically, for one day. He was just wondering how to broach the subject of a return visit on the morrow when his hostess said, "Mr Berkley, I know I have no right to drag you into my troubles, but I do feel so upset about Graham Rivers and it would be such a relief to have some one to talk it over with."

"Count on me," George assured her.

"Could you—I wonder, is it asking too much to suggest that you come here to lunch to-morrow?"

"Willingly."

"At one o'clock?"

"I shall be here."

She thanked him no less with her lovely eyes than with a pretty turn of speech, and George Stanhope Berkley, always a susceptible young man, issued himself a warning. "Good job you're a respectable member of society, young fellow," he told himself, "or you'd be going in off the deep end before you knew where you were."

His hostess begged him not to run the risk of the darkened Mews again, and, all things considered, George was inclined to think that the comparative safety of Mount Street was desirable. With renewed assurances about the morrow, and ever-increasing curiosity in George's inquiring brain, they took leave of each other on the doorstep.

Turning from his last adieu, George accidentally bumped into some one in the street. The conventional apology that rose to his lips was quashed by the other man's surly "Why the devil can't you look where you're going?"

The remark was so uncalled for that for a moment George looked with astonishment at the man who made it. He was dressed in evening clothes, with a light rain-coat over them, and a soft hat, and although it fitted him perfectly the correct black-and-white of evening wear looked anachronistic on him, so massive was his frame, so powerful and bull-like his shoulders. His face, for all its sullen coarseness, had a certain fineness about it. He looked just what he was—a splendid animal, with the appetites, the strength, and the courage of an animal.

"Gent's in a bad temper," thought George facetiously; but, feeling that he had experienced enough alarms and excursions for one night, he made no response, beyond an exaggeratedly polite doffing of his hat, and with that silent rebuke to ill-manners he walked jauntily along Mount Street. But out of the corner of an observant eye he saw what he wanted to see. The big man had not passed No. 26 Burton Mews; he had gone in, and the door was already closing behind his massive back.

George laughed. "Well, hang me, if Madame Kyatt

And that careless young fool who was here to-night—he was good-looking enough.”

“Don’t be a fool, Stephan! I’ve told you about him

“Yes, but have you told me about them all?” The man laughed, and rose from his chair. He stretched his colossal bulk, and yawned “Ah, well, my dear, I must be going. The night is still young.”

The woman rose quickly. “You are not leaving me now?” she asked, and she could have struck him in anger for the mock surprise with which he raised his eyebrows and blinked at her

“But why not, my dear? You wouldn’t flatter me by saying you want me to stay, would you?”

“Ah, Stephan,” she cried in a low voice, “you know I want you to stay. You know I want it I want you, more than anything else in the world, *now*.”

The man disengaged his shoulders from the white arms that sought to encircle them. He held the woman at arm’s length, and for a moment it almost seemed that he intended to pick her up in one colossal hand, which he could easily have done.

“You can’t have me, my dear,” he said, with a sort of brutal geniality. “But maybe, if I find anyone sufficiently agreeable, we might come back and have a chat with you”

The woman looked at him for a moment in silence, and then said, in an almost expressionless voice. “Stephan, if you ever did that to me, if you ever brought another of your women here, I should kill you.”

The man roared with laughter. “Damned if I don’t believe you would, too!” he said, and giving her a slap on the cheek with one of his giant hands, he rolled his

THE HEART OF MAYFAIR

way out of the room and out of the house in great good humour with himself.

He left behind a woman who would not go to bed because she knew that she would be unable to sleep. She sat by the fire smoking, until the flames had died and the ashes were as cold as her thoughts and as her jealous heart.

to give him his direction. The man in front knew his way, and never hesitated, and at times George had difficulty in keeping in touch. When Finsbury Park and Manor House were passed, and all the drab and dreary northern suburbs began to fall behind, and still the big saloon car pressed on, he started to get anxious about his luncheon appointment. There was still more than plenty of time to keep it if he gave up the pursuit and cruised easily back, but more and more he was reluctant to give up the chase. Though fogged now as to the details of their route, he knew well enough that its general direction lay north with a touch of east in it, and north with a touch of east in it, as George realized, must mean eventually Essex, and Essex might mean—Tong.

He wondered Graham Rivers had spoken of Tong, and Graham Rivers had died. The person who, on her own showing, knew most of Graham Rivers' movements on the last night of his life had said nothing at all about Tong. Maybe she had been careful not to, but all the same there had been an envelope standing on her mantelshelf bearing the Tong postmark.

George had an increasing feeling that Tong might prove worth a visit.

When Epping was reached to be back in time for lunch was out of the question, and when they got well beyond Epping to that part which suddenly ceases to have any urban-like aspirations at all, and with startling abruptness becomes the most desolate of rural countrysides, full of such names as Stebbing and Chickney, Bocking and Bardfield, George had dismissed lunch from his mind altogether.

He was in a part entirely unknown to him, and his great concern was not to lose the fast-travelling car in

front, and yet to keep sufficiently far behind it to avoid arousing suspicion. He was just beginning to wonder how much longer the chase was going to continue when a yellow-and-black A.A. sign flashed by, and with a quickening of his pulse George read the name of the village "Tong," and realized simultaneously that the pace had slackened.

Nevertheless, they went through Tong without stopping, turned sharp left at the bottom of a hill, passed through the tiny hamlet of By-Earsley, and seemed all set for a continuation of the run into the back of beyond, when without warning the quarry turned right, through a dilapidated gateway, and disappeared from sight up a winding drive.

For a second George was fool enough to take his foot off the accelerator and slow up, but almost instantly he realized his folly, and, restoring his speed to normal, he sailed uncaringly by the drive entrance and for a good half-mile farther on.

Then just beyond a crossroad and under the lee of a high hedge he halted, and lit a reflective cigarette. He reckoned that his quarry had gone to earth some three miles this side of Tong, which he deemed sufficiently near the centre of the target to warrant a little further investigation. He scrambled up the bank at the side of the road and looked round.

It was true Essex countryside, flatish, well cultivated, and as lonely as might well be. Some straight-backed cattle grazed in the next field ahead, and half a mile beyond them the ground rose in a gentle slope to a crest covered by a low plantation, which on that March morning looked singularly black and lifeless. There were some farm buildings away on the right, but no sign anywhere

of human life. Essex, like its inhabitants, is not inclined to over-expression; it keeps its secrets well

"If you wanted to hide for any reason," George reflected, "you couldn't choose a better spot. An hour and a half's run from London, and as quiet as a graveyard"

He scrambled down the bank into his car again, and glanced at the dashboard clock. It showed barely a quarter to one, and not one pang of regret did George suffer over his broken appointment. The most seductive siren in the West End of London offering him lunch and every Lucullian delight, would not have tempted him away then from flat, deserted, and mysterious Essex.

He reversed at the crossroad, and went more slowly by the drive entrance where the saloon car had disappeared. There was an ancient-looking lodge, with the legend "Northwood House" just discernible on two weather-beaten gate pillars, but the house itself was hidden in trees. Neither at the lodge, nor in the drive, nor, indeed, anywhere, did he catch a glimpse of any life, and he motored on to By-Earsley in a state of doubt.

By-Earsley, for all its remoteness, possessed a sub-post-office and an excellent inn, and George had need of both.

Putting his car into the cobbled yard of the Greyhound, George made his way to the tiny bow-windowed cottage which, besides being the only shop in By-Earsley, also transacted the business of His Majesty's Postmaster-General. He put in a telephone call to London, and lit a cigarette to await his summons as patiently as he could.

Except that he was tartly requested by the post-mistress, a real Essex virago, to stop smoking, as she did not allow it in her shop, nothing of note happened until

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a shrill bell rang, and the same thin lips announced
"Reckon that's your call to London."

George squeezed himself into the tiny cabin, and carefully shut the door behind him. He had a notion that those acid lips were topped by a pair of over-acute ears, and he saw no occasion for providing more material for local gossip than was necessary.

"That you, Clarke?"

The ex-Marine's reassuring affirmative came from far away Jerryne Street.

"I want you to 'phone for me."

"Yes, sir. Where?"

George spelled out the name and address of his would-be hostess, and after some difficulty with the name, for he instinctively mistrusted names beginning with "A," Clarke got it right.

"Good! Now just say that I'm extremely sorry that I can't come to lunch because I'm ill."

"Are you ill, sir?"

"No."

"Not ill?"

"No, you lunatic! I'm as fit as a fiddle; but I want you to say 'ill'."

It is difficult to convey over the telephone the impression that you are respectfully winking, but Clarke's tone of voice somehow managed to do it.

"I see, sir."

"Get it all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right-o! Do it straight away. I shall be back for you, Clarke."

"Very good, sir."

George emerged from the telephone cabin, paid his

fee, which was grudgingly acknowledged to be just right, and, full of hunger and anticipation, set off for the Greyhound once more. He was pleased that he had not been precipitate enough to telephone direct from By-Earsley. He had no particular desire for the lady of Burton Mews to know that he was in any way acquainted with what was no doubt a sub-office of the district from which her letters came.

The Greyhound was in the true tradition of that great bulwark of liberty and sane living throughout Europe—the inn.

Outside, even despite a few concessions to the needs of modernity, such as a petrol pump, it was friendly and pleasing, and this agreeable atmosphere George felt to be intensified at once the moment he pushed open the door and walked into the bar.

No saloon bars for George. He knew from long experience that if you want to know the local gossip you must go into the bar, retire into a corner, and, if you are a stranger to the place, keep quite quiet and listen.

Accordingly he put this programme into operation, and was soon seated by one side of the cheerful fire with a hunk of bread and a slab of noble cheese before him, and at his elbow a pewter pint pot of most excellent ale. Kings in their palaces fare no better.

The landlord was a short, bald-headed man, with the sharp, beady eyes proper to the Essex native; and while busy cleaning his glasses he kept up a monosyllabic conversation, tinged with respect, for a stock customer who was leaning against the bar. Velveteens, gaiters, and gun-patches on the shoulders made it easy to place this individual, and George, knowing the inquisitiveness of

NORTHWOOD HOUSE

wrong That won't be more than three parts of a mile up the road noways, will it, William? "

William said that it wouldn't, and a most ridiculous argument ensued as to what distance could safely be called a mile.

The annual Whit Sunday sports, some local object of interest known as Miller's Oak, and the time that a certain greyhound had taken to run a race in a field near Braintree were all quoted in turn George cut all this short by his second question: "Does anyone live there, or is it empty? "

"A foreigner " was said to live there, but George received the word with caution In Essex 'foreigner ' may—in fact, usually does—mean somebody from the neighbouring valley ten miles away, but the next item of news sounded slightly more promising. "Supposed to be an inventor or some such," the chauffeur volunteered. "They reckon 'e's got an aeroplane and all sorts there "

The two farm labourers looked at each other in contempt, not unmingled with pity, for the folly of such wild talk, and with the entrance into the bar of a fresh-comer, a breezy, red-faced, loud-voiced cattle-dealer. the matter was dropped No further reference was made to Northwood House or its tenant, and George was distinctly made to feel that for a stranger in an Essex inn he had already far overstepped the mark in the way of curiosity So he asked no more questions, but, drinking his beer and paying his reckoning, he made his way out into the cobbled yard.

He decided that the car would be more a hindrance than a help in his explorations, so he left it undisturbed, and made his way on foot up the lane again.

that casual observation would never have revealed it and George was sufficiently curious to investigate a little farther. What he discovered only whetted his interest. The stump and the wire were not isolated. Four yards farther on was another stump, four yards beyond that yet another, and the wire ran fixedly and designedly between them.

George had suddenly not the slightest doubt that it ran thus fixedly and designedly through the entire wood, and likely enough round the whole property. He looked about him with added interest. If it was worth somebody's while to put a burglar alarm round Northwood House he felt more certain than ever that it was going to be worth his while to investigate the place. He waited for a full couple of minutes. No sound came from where he thought the house must lie, nor did any alarm seem to have been given, and, partially reassured by this, he went more carefully forward.

He reached the edge of the belt of trees without further incident, and found himself standing, as it were, on the rim of a saucer, for the ground sloped down quite sharply to a broad, flat basin, in the middle of which stood the house.

He stood there staring for a few minutes and though the place seemed lifeless and deserted his sense of excitement was quickened rather than lessened by the sight of it. It was a long, low building somewhat untidily planned; many of its windows had their blinds drawn and this gave it a curiously blank look. No one moved about it, and everything seemed quite still.

But for all its apparent blankness and stillness George wondered. Then his eye was taken by something else. At one side of the house, separated from it by some

three hundred yards, was a curious-looking shed, standing in what would normally have been a paddock for the hunters, or some such innocent adjunct of a country house. But this was no paddock; it was bare of fence or hedge, and looked as level all over as a cricket-pitch.

For a moment George was puzzled, then the curious shape of the shed suggested something to him, and he remembered the words of the chauffeur at the Greyhound. "... got an aeroplane and all sorts there."

"What the devil does a man want with burglar alarms and aeroplanes in the loneliest part of Essex?" George wondered, and almost immediately he nearly jumped out of his skin, for a hand was laid lightly on his shoulder.

"Are you interested in old houses, young man?" asked a quiet voice.

"By gad, you scared the life out of me!" George complained somewhat unreasonably. He found himself looking at an elderly man with every outward appearance of a benevolent country gentleman.

"I am sorry to have startled you," the quiet, kindly voice continued, "but, walking through my own woods, I hardly expected to come upon a stranger."

George recovered himself at once. "Of course not. It's I that should apologize, sir. I realize that I am trespassing, but on the other hand I had no intention of doing any harm. I'm fond of Essex, and whenever I find myself walking in a new part of it I always try to see what I can of the old houses, and so on."

"So you are fond of walking?"

"Yes, very! Whenever I can slip away from London for a day in the country I do."

"Excellent! And you are interested in domestic architecture?"

"I can't pretend to know a lot about it, but what I do know certainly interests me. But I don't want to take up your time, sir, as well as trespass on your land."

"My dear young man, I am delighted to find one of the younger generation with such intelligent pursuits." The owner of Northwood House slipped his arm quite naturally through George's, and said hospitably, "If you are interested in the house, come and have a look at it. The outside is not very attractive, I'm afraid, but there are compensations in the interior."

He began to make his way forward down the sloping grass, and George went with him, feeling a little out of his depth, and quite unable to decide whether this arm-in-arm business was unaffected geniality or the most polite form of peaceful persuasion. However, it suited his book to have a closer look at Northwood House, and so he raised no demur.

The elderly man by his side was talking in the easy cultured way of an interesting companion. "Curious how whoever built the house deliberately chose a hollow to put it in. Some people might not like it, but it suits me. I'm old-fashioned, and I like quiet and seclusion."

"You get plenty of both here, I imagine," George volunteered.

"Plenty!" The man gave a curious little dry laugh. "And yet, you know, sometimes not quite all the seclusion we want."

"One in the eye for me," thought George, but the reproof was offered so gently that he could hardly take exception to it. They had now got considerably nearer the house, and its appearance did not improve on closer

acquaintance The drive was ill kept, and the house itself badly in need of a coat of paint. The whole habitation had a slovenly air, and yet for all its slovenliness there was something watchful and alert about it

Though he scanned the windows carefully George saw no sign of any living thing, and yet he had the definite impression somehow that their approach was not unwatched He began to feel at a loss, and he decided to play out a trump in the hope of forcing a trick.

"Is that flat field an aerodrome?" he asked suddenly.

Any hope that the abruptness of his question might catch his host unawares was disappointed, the man answered quite naturally and easily. "Yes—or rather it used to be The man who lived here before me was keen on flying, and kept his own private machine I'm afraid I'm not so modern, but I find the shed very useful for various things Now, if you are interested in architecture you can see where the old part of the house lies That is seventeenth-century work probably, and all this to the east is more modern "

George displayed as intelligent an interest as he felt capable of in these details, and all the time he was growing more and more curious to know what had brought the thug of Burton Mews and the big, hasty-tempered man to this apparently peaceful spot The elderly man by his side seemed harmless enough George wondered whether he was being used by the others as a dupe, or even whether some unexpected explanation would not be forthcoming which would solve everything satisfactorily, and show the whole thing to be a mare's-nest

By now they had gone through the doorway—the door was an exceptionally stout-looking affair, George noticed—and were in the hall, which was surprisingly fine, with a well-proportioned staircase running up to a gallery.

"I don't know whether you are interested in pictures at all?" the soft voice asked.

George glanced quickly round the hall. There were some large canvasses on the walls, mostly dull-looking affairs with colossal and unlikely figures of gods and angels scattered about in improbable postures.

"Well, I can't pretend to be an art expert," he laughed, "but I must say I am very fond of the Dutch school."

"My dear young man," his host cried delightedly, "you keep disclosing fresh virtues. I had no idea that any young people of to-day were interested in the Dutch school. You must come into my study at once. I have one or two Dutch pictures there, not masterpieces, maybe, but I venture to think they are worth a collector's notice. I shall be interested to hear what you think of them."

He led the way across the hall to a room on the left, and, opening the door, politely stood on one side and ushered George in.

It was evidently the room of a student. There was a profusion of books everywhere, the walls were well lined with them, and they lay about on chairs and tables. There was a desk liberally littered with papers, and a bright fire burned in the hearth. Altogether it seemed as friendly and innocent a place as might be imagined.

"Either there's something very deep here indeed," George thought, "or else I'm harling up the wrong tree."

altogether," and he had to keep a tight mental hold on the mysterious affairs of the previous evening concerned with Graham Rivers' death to retain any sort of assurance at all.

"Now, how do you like these?" the man asked eagerly, crossing to the far wall, where three small canvasses hung. "I'm afraid the light isn't too good here, but it must serve. This top one is my favourite, I think. It's a genuine Van Dyst. He was a student of Vandmeer, as of course you know, and some collectors, including Mr Pierpont Morgan, I believe, hold that his best work at least equalled that of his master. London has no Van Dysts—in public galleries, I mean, but there are two in the Louvre and half a dozen indifferent ones in Venice. Isn't it delightful?"

George studied the picture critically. His boast about liking the Dutch school had not been an entirely idle one, for whereas three-quarters of the exhibits in any public picture-gallery bored him to tears—and some of them definitely gave him a pain in the neck—he had always felt an affectionate regard for the detailed domesticity and the delightful microcosm of the Dutch pictures.

The Van Dyst was typical of its school. It showed the interior of a house. In the left foreground was the diminutive figure of a girl, with a very solemn, round Dutch face; standing by her was a dog, something after a greyhound in appearance; and—true Dutch trick—through an open doorway on the right could be seen a far-off winter prospect, with a whole world of tiny people skating and playing the buffoon. There was a humanity about its conception and a richness in its colouring that made it most attractive.

When you are asked your opinion of a work of art by its owner there is infinite relief in being able to combine truth and politeness in your reply. George was pleased to be able to answer eagerly, "I like it. It is just the sort of picture that appeals to me."

"Good!" his host beamed. "Now, as for the others— Ah, I hear the telephone bell in the other room. Will you excuse me a minute, please?"

George too had heard a bell, but it was unlike any telephone bell of his acquaintance. However, the detail caused him no worry, and in the absence of his host he cast an inquiring eye round the room. His first pleasant impressions were confirmed by closer inspection. A great bowl of daffodils stood on a table in the bay of the window, and the whole scheme of decoration and furniture seemed to give evidence of a man of culture and taste. Two doors led from the room. One, through which his host had just departed, gave into the hall, the other was in the wall behind the desk, and quite close to where George stood.

The fancy took George that he would like to open that second door and see whether all the interior of Northwood House was like its show piece, the study. With one ear pricked to catch the returning footsteps of his host, and with the not altogether comfortable feeling that he was spying in somebody else's house, he crossed over to the door and opened it. What he saw made him start in amazement.

The room he looked into was small and bare, save for an easy-chair and a luxurious couch; there was only one small window and no pictures. But it was the walls that held George's interest in a sort of fascinated disgust. They were covered from floor to ceiling, and all round

the room, with the most indescribably obscene and licentious paintings imaginable. Every grossness, every possible ingenious perversion of all decencies and normalities, seemed to be blazoned there with unbelievable blatancy. George Berkley was a man among men, no one less Puritanically inclined ever hit the occasional high spots of Mayfair. But here he stood disgusted, and, indeed, feeling physically sick. There was something rotten and corrupt about this deliberate glorying in gross bestiality.

He was jerked back to his senses by the sound of footsteps in the hall, and he only just had time to nip back into the study before his benevolent host, full of apologies for having had to absent himself, came hurrying in. He plunged at once into the subject of pictures again, and for ten minutes or more gave what George was willing to admit was no less than a brilliant extempore discussion on the relative merits of the Dutch, the Italian, and the early English schools.

But George's interest was no longer with schools of painting. He kept thinking with a shock that the plump little man who sat there talking in his cultured voice was the same who would walk into the room next door and take pleasure in its obscene beastliness. The whole atmosphere had changed. George felt that the kindness and the show of culture and the soft voice were all a mask, and under the mask lay rotten corruption—and what else?

Once, in the middle of the talk about painting, he noticed a sudden gleam in the other man's eyes. It was gone in a minute. If you liked to tell yourself lies you might persuade yourself it had never been there, but if you believed in the truth at all costs, as George did, you

were made uncomfortable by that momentary hardening of the glance, as though a window had been thrown open for a split second on to something cold and fanatical and inhuman inside that clever head.

George felt distinctly uncomfortable, and for a special reason. He was sitting with his back to the desk, and a sudden doubt leaped into his mind as to whether he had closed the door in the wall behind him. He wondered whether he had left it unlatched, and whether those uncomfortable eyes, noticing this, had drawn their own conclusions. And then, out of the void, a phrase which the Colonel had used on the previous evening about the Bluefeather business ran into his mind: "*. . . like some benevolent retired insurance broker to talk to; and in reality underneath the mask . . . sheer cold, detached evil, as ruthless as a god—or a devil.*" On the instant certainty came to George that he had struck something big, and with that certainty came cold fear. He did not now like to look at the man talking quietly about the beauties of art: there was something horribly sinister in his very quietness; and when at one moment he carefully picked up a ladybird which had flown on to his desk and moved it out of harm's way George wanted to scream. There was something indecently insane about the hand that could do that kindly act, and the ice-cold brain behind it blazing with fanatical desire to bring all the Western world into ruins, and to deny for ever peace to the peoples of the world.

"... but doubtless I am boring you, my young friend?"

George started. He found that his tongue was dry in his mouth. "No, rather not!" he managed to stammer. "I'm intensely interested, really I am."

"Perhaps you will do me the honour of taking refreshment with me? Personally I never drink tea, and I am afraid I haven't even got it to offer you, but would a glass of wine be acceptable?"

"Very!" George answered, in complete control of himself again. It was as though, having once realized that the kindness and humanity of the man were only a mask, he felt steeled to face what lay beneath. "If you get me out of Northwood House before I'm a deal wiser than at present you're lucky, Mr Paris postcard maniac," he thought to himself.

His host picked up a house telephone on the desk, and, pressing a button, said gently into the receiver, "The wine, Carl. Bring the wine, please," and with surprising quickness the door opened and a servant came in with a tray and two glasses of wine.

One of these he set before each of the men in the room, and George chuckled inwardly. He was getting proof in plenty that what he was after was no mare's-nest, for he already knew by sight the servant who brought in the drinks. He had seen the mean, narrow face, the almost bald head, the close-set eyes before—and not twenty-four hours before—when he was in Graham Rivers' room, looking out at the two men who had brought that unfortunate youth home for the last time.

"Thank you, Carl," said the quiet man.

"I'll Carl him!" George thought angrily. "I'll Carl the whole lot of you!"

"What shall we drink to, young man?" asked his host. "To the best art of all, the art of living?"

"To the art of living decently," George amended, raising and draining his glass.

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Five minutes later he slid from his chair into a senseless, helpless huddle on the richly carpeted floor, scientifically and completely drugged.

With the slightest of contemptuous smiles twisting his thin mouth the Doctor stretched out a plump little hand and rang a bell at his side.

CHAPTER X

JOE THE COOT

IN response to the Doctor's summons Lodder came somewhat surlily into the room. He was not a man who obeyed easily: it was more to his liking to give orders than to receive them, but all other thoughts were chased out of his head when his eyes fell on the form prostrate on the floor.

"*Gott in Himmel!*" the big man exclaimed in ludicrous astonishment "How did he get here?"

The Doctor, who was coolly writing at his desk, finished his sentence and blotted it carefully before he looked up and answered, "You seem surprised to see our visitor?"

"I thought Hilda was having him to lunch. I told you all about it—what she arranged and everything"

The Doctor inclined his head "Our young friend evidently had other ideas About an hour ago the alarm went for the west side of the park, and I thought I would stroll out and see what country bumpkin was stupid enough to come trespassing where he wasn't wanted. Instead of a country bumpkin I found this inquisitive young man, and I took steps to deal with him so that he won't trouble us further at least for a while"

Lodder grinned, he could never help admiring the Doctor's efficiency. "What about Hilda?" he asked

"You must ring her up Bauer is with her, but not Carl I kept him here When we were in the middle of a friendly chat I made an excuse to slip out and give the

"I too wonder, my friend, and I do not like to wonder. I like to be certain. And of one thing I am certain not this interfering young Englishman, nor their precious Colonel, nor any of them, even suspects the existence of the island."

"You are thinking of going there?"

"Not thinking about it, friend Lodder, I have made up my mind about it." The Doctor's voice dropped some of its smoothness, and hardened a little as he gave his orders. "You will ring up Hilda now, she and Bauer are to come here at once. Carl is to get the 'plane ready, and as soon as Hilda and Bauer arrive we will start."

"And *this*?" Lodder brushed George roughly with his foot.

"Since the young gentleman is so anxious to call on us he shall do so," the Doctor answered. "We take him with us; maybe he will prove useful. If not, at least he can do no harm."

Lodder nodded; he knew it was all sound advice. "And—er——?" He raised his eyes to the ceiling, as though indicating some one or something in the room above.

"Leave the gentleman upstairs to me," the Doctor said. "I will let him know we contemplate taking him for a journey."

Lodder lumbered towards the door, but when he reached it he turned and asked, "You think it necessary to take Hilda to the island?"

"Not only necessary, my dear Lodder," the Doctor answered, rubbing his hands together with a sort of horrible gentility, "but desirable, highly desirable."

The two men looked at each other for a second, and then without speaking, Lodder left the room.

During the morning, when George Berkley was making preparations for starting the motor trip to Tong that ended so disastrously, the Colonel, for a very good reason, was not worrying in the slightest about the young man. The Colonel had other things to worry about. He dared not leave Clarence's for a minute, and, with a tale that Scotland Yard considered it desirable, he went to Farant and secured a single room next to the Verney suite. With this as a base of operations he was able to keep his eye on everything. Meals were brought up for Paul Verney and his secretary. The waiter was allowed to bring them into Stathers' sitting-room, and no farther; and there, when the waiter had left, they were duly consumed by Stathers and the Colonel. The latter, in his thorough way, also had meals taken to his room to avoid comment, and, as far as he could see was destined to eat a double ration until Verney was discovered.

The Colonel knew, none better, that to succeed a bluff must be an active one, and that a really active bluff, courageously conceived and carried out, can be pushed to amazing lengths. Three times the floor waiter was summoned, and sent out for papers or books which Mr Verney wanted at once. Not only this, but the valet was rung for, and solemnly given Mr Verney's dress clothes to be pressed immediately.

All this was excellent as far as it went. There was not a member of Clarence's staff who would have failed to regard you as a certifiable lunatic if you had suggested that a man who arrived in full view of every one not twenty-four hours ago, who was known to be tired and resting, and whose half-dozen behests had been carried out like lightning, was no longer there.

But the Colonel knew how limited his hand was. The

worst enemy of all was against him—Time and Time held all the trumps. So at ten o'clock next morning the Colonel, who had done a deal more thinking than sleeping during the night, set about strengthening his position with a characteristically bold stroke.

The faithful Wilson, who had been relieved during the night, was back again at his post, and it was to him that the Colonel, coming out of the private suite, and shutting the door carefully, spoke.

"Wilson!"

"Sir?"

"I want Joe the Coot."

Even Wilson's well-trained eyes grew wide with surprise. "You want Joe the Coot, sir?"

The Colonel laughed reassuringly. "Yes. There's a bit of information he may be able to give me that I want. I was going to see him at the Yard, of course; but for some reason or other Mr Verney doesn't want me to leave him, and so I must see Joe here."

"Just so, sir."

"Superintendent Trevor will know where he is, but don't tell the Super why you want him."

"No, sir. And when I get him am I to bring him along here to you, sir?"

"Not the front way; I don't want to shock Walters too much. Bring him in the side entrance, and smuggle him up the service lift."

"Very good, sir."

"I'll look after the door here. Off you go, Wilson, quick as you can."

Wilson sketched a salute and went. Men who served under the Colonel learned early on not to question, but to do, and to do quickly.

mounted on the lorry, and whisked away to oblivion together with four hundred pounds in its interior.

It was the knowledge of this love of audacity in Joe that made the Colonel seek his help now.

"Joe," he said suddenly, "I want you to help me."

Joe sniffed suspiciously at this unexpected olive branch. "I'm not blowin' the gaff on no pals, Colonel," he warned.

"I don't want you to. I've got a job for you. Listen. . . ."

Joe the Coot listened. In a short time he was laughing: at the end of half an hour he and the Colonel were shaking hands on a bargain.

"Don't forget," the Colonel summed up. "you'll want two vans and a large tea-chest. You must fix all that up. And a uniform, of course—some sort of peaked cap."

"Leave that to me, Colonel."

"And, Joe—only you and I know about this, and if a breath of it gets about anywhere I shall know you've split. And if you split so shall I—about something else. It's about twenty to one against your pulling it off. If they nab you you've got to shut your mouth and stand the racket, and I'll make it worth while afterwards. Agreed?"

Joe the Coot nodded. "Trust me, Colonel," he said fervently; and, such is the oddness of human character and behaviour, that the Colonel did trust him implicitly.

"Good luck!" he said. "Whether you pull it off or not, you needn't worry about anything out of the pot as long as you keep mum. This wipes the lot out."

Joe grinned gratefully, and made his exit.

Twenty minutes later the Colonel strolled down the

to the hall and sought out Walters, who on seeing who wanted him came like greased lightning out of his sanctum.

"Sir?"

"Oh, Walters, Mr Verney has a lot of important papers and books arriving some time to-day. They'll be delivered at the side-door, of course, in a case of some sort. Will you see that they are brought upstairs to the suite at once?"

"The moment they arrive, sir."

"Good!"

"And how is Mr Verney, if I may ask, sir?"

"Better, but still very tired. He is most anxious to get about and see people, but I keep begging him to remember what his doctor said. After all, we don't want him laid up for the Peace Pact."

"You're right. We don't, sir," Walters agreed fervently.

Having disposed of that, the Colonel went upstairs again, and sat down to await events as patiently as he might. When half-past two had gone by he began to get restless, and finally at a quarter to three he walked into Stathers' sitting-room and asked, "What time did young Berkley say he would be here?"

"Half-past two."

"It's gone that a quarter of an hour ago, and he isn't usually late. You're sure of what he said, Stathers?"

"Perfectly. I went, as you instructed me last night, to his house in Jervyne Street to learn what happened. By a coincidence—as I have already told you—he and I arrived on the doorstep together. I told him you were anxious to know any news, and he said that he had nothing to tell you then, but he was going out again

this morning, and hoped to come and see you with something definite at half-past two. That's all I know."

The Colonel nodded thoughtfully. "Damned impudent young puppy!" he said. "He ought to have come back straight away last night. I can't understand his not doing it."

Stathers shrugged his shoulders, and turned once more to the papers on his table. The Colonel went back to the other sitting-room, and lit a meditative pipe. What he had just heard from Stathers was almost a word-for-word repetition of what that polite but reserved young man had told him last night, and the Colonel did not like it now any more than he had done then. The more he turned the story over in his mind the more inexplicable it became that George Berkley should behave in such a manner; and when three o'clock came and there was still no sign of the young man the Colonel went unostentatiously downstairs to a telephone cabinet.

"That you, Clarke?"

"Mr Berkley's manservant speaking."

"This is the Colonel."

There was an almost audible click from the other end as Clarke came smartly to attention. He knew the Colonel of old. "Sir?"

"Is Mr Berkley there?"

"No, sir."

Gradually the Colonel heard fragments of a story that puzzled him a good deal. He heard that George had called at Jervyne Street the previous evening at about a quarter to eleven with a story of a young man being dead and of possible police questioning; that meanwhile a somewhat mysterious message from 26 Burton Mews had arrived, and that George almost immediately set off

JOE THE COOT

in response to it; that he had come back some time in the late hours after having a bit of a scrap with some roughs, that after working for an hour or so next morning he had gone out, and at about a quarter to one had rung Clarke up and instructed him to 'phone cancelling a luncheon appointment

"Since then you haven't seen him?"

"No, sir"

"Where did he ring up from at lunch-time?"

"Couldn't say, sir"

"Um!" The Colonel grunted, and hung up the receiver. Almost immediately he made another call, and set on foot certain investigations which he hoped would bear fruit. He then went thoughtfully upstairs again just in time to see two men depositing a large plywood chest marked "Books. Urgent" outside the door of the private suite

"This all right, sir?" Wilson asked.

The Colonel's eyes twinkled as he replied, "Yes, quite all right. Mr Verney's waiting for it. Bring it into the sitting-room, and I'll let him know that it's come"

The two porters duly carried the case into the suite, and the Colonel followed, highly gratified. Secretly he had hardly dared to hope that his piece of colossal impudence could succeed, and he took it as a sort of good omen that his other bluff would stay uncalled until events came to save him. "Thank the Lord for that old sinner Joe the Coot!" he said to himself. "If ever there was an artist in audacity, it's Joe"

Once the porters were dismissed with suitable rewards and the doors shut behind them Stathers, who had come in to see what the noise was about, said, "I didn't know Mr Verney had any books on order."

The Colonel was cutting the cord that held the top of the case on. "You never know what a man like Verney will be up to," he said cryptically.

"Perhaps, as the case is addressed to Mr Verney, it would be more fitting if I opened it," Stathers suggested in an icy tone.

The Colonel laughed. "I wrote the label," he said. "so I think I'd better take the lid off. . . . Here we are. Look!"

"My God, they've killed him!" Stathers called in a voice full of terror and remorse.

The Colonel shot a glance at the dapper little secretary. His face was marble white, and his horrified eyes seemed likely to start from his head. He swayed as though he would faint.

"Don't be a fool!" the Colonel said roughly, and reaching down, he laid a hand on the figure of Paul Verney which, fully clothed and in a doubled-up position, was neatly housed in the wooden case. Carefully but strongly the Colonel lifted the figure up and set it down in a sitting posture on a chair. Then, seeing the conflicting emotions chase one another across Stathers' face, he sat down himself and roared with laughter.

"Took you in all right, Stathers," he said. "The very best wax model obtainable—straight from Madame Tussaud's."

"My God," Stathers whispered, still a good deal shaken, "I thought he—it was real!"

"And so will the waiter when he comes in," the Colonel said. "We can't expect to bluff for ever on nothing but this ought to help us carry on for another day, anyway. I suddenly remembered that Madame Tussaud's has been showing a model of Verney writing

at a desk for some weeks now, and the thought came to me that it might as well be on display here as there, so I borrowed it."

"You borrowed it! They know you have got it?"

"‘Borrow,’ my dear Stathers, is a euphemism. In the language of the Force, I put into operation the Ways and Means Act—and here it is. I’m going to put it at the table in the corner, and if it isn’t lifelike enough to deceive a waiter who comes in here with a tray for half a minute I’ll eat my hat. And with a little judicious arrangement of furniture I think we could make it visible through the window—only, of course, we must take care to shift its position fairly often."

Stathers, who seemed to be still in a state of shock, mingled with exasperation at having been deceived, nodded, and went back without comment to his own sitting-room.

An hour later, when the Colonel had arranged everything to his satisfaction, he was called into the corridor to speak to a freckled, rather moonfaced individual, who behind a disarming exterior hid one of the most persistent and faithful brains in the Colonel’s service.

"Hallo, Peters! How d’you get on?"

"I had a word with Mr Berkley’s servant, sir, and he repeated what he told you over the telephone. Then I went to Burton Mews—a queer little place close to South Audley Street. Number twenty-six is the best house in it, which isn’t saying much as far as exteriors go. There was no one there, and it was all shut up, but there was some one there this morning, because the paper and milk were delivered and taken in. And it’s right about the scrap, sir. As a matter of fact, there were two shindies in the Mews last night."

"Two?" the Colonel asked, puzzled.

"Yes. An old lady who lives half-way down the place told me about them. The first was simply a couple of drunks, she thought, and its chief result was smashing the only lamp in the Mews. The second one seemed a more lively affair. She thinks there were more than two people in it, and they all seemed to be fighting at once."

"Um! She didn't see any of 'em?"

"No, sir: too terrified to look."

"This smashed lamp—I suppose once that was out the place was pretty dark?"

"Black as a bag, I should say, sir."

"Was the lamp near Number twenty-six?"

"Yes. The place is a *cul-de-sac*, and Number twenty-six is the actual end of it. It's a double-fronted house, with a more imposing entrance in Mount Street."

"Double-fronted or double-faced?" the Colonel asked.

"Well, what else?"

"Mr Berkley took his car out this morning at about eleven, sir. Thinking he might have been involved in an accident, sir, I got the number and description from his garage, and had them circulated by telephone to all the principal police-stations in the toll area with a request for information, if any. As a matter of fact, Phillips is still doing it."

"Good! Any result?"

"Not yet, sir."

"You've done well, Peters. If you get any answer to that inquiry about the car come here to me in person with it."

"Very good, sir."

Peters had not been away quite an hour when he was back again with the required information.

"Any luck?" the Colonel asked eagerly.

"Yes, sir. A message from Tong——"

"Where?"

"Tong, sir."

"Go on."

"A message from Tong to say that Mr Berkley's car has been in the yard of the local pub since about twelve-thirty. The innkeeper was getting a bit anxious about the car—thought it might have been stolen or something—and he rang up the Tong station about twenty minutes ago."

"Is the car at Tong itself?"

"No, in a village close by, By-Earsley—a tiny place apparently. Tong's the nearest police-station."

"And it's been there since lunch-time?"

"Yes. Somebody, presumably Mr Berkley, arrived at lunch-time, had some bread-and-cheese and beer, and walked out after leaving the car in the yard. And whoever it was hasn't been seen since."

The Colonel was silent for fully two minutes. Much as he disliked leaving Clarence's even for a second, he felt that he dared not miss going to see what clue By-Earsley had to give him as to George's whereabouts.

"Got your car here?" he asked suddenly.

"Outside, sir."

"How long will it take us to get down to this By-Earsley place and back?"

Peters grinned. He rather prided himself on his high averages. "I'll get you there as quickly as anyone can, sir," he promised, "if you are in a hurry."

"I am—in the devil of a hurry," the Colonel answered grimly. "Let me just have a word with Mr Stathers and Wilson, and then I'm ready."

Peters lived up to his promise, and the Colonel not normally a nervous man, only spoke once on that hair-raising journey. When the speedometer needle was hovering round sixty-two, with Epping hardly behind them, he said, "You're a damn' fine driver, Peters, but, by God, if we weren't on a job I'd gaol you for a month for this!"

They pulled up outside the Greyhound in By-Earsley with George's time for the course well beaten. The Colonel glanced inside the bar to see what sort of place it was. A short, stocky man in velveteens and gaiters stood at the counter; at a table near the fire sat two sharp-eyed Essex hinds. The three of them had not been there continuously since George last saw them somewhere about half-past one, but doubtless if the licensing laws and their own occupations had permitted it they would have been. The Colonel bid them good-evening, got a suspicious grunt in response, and withdrew. In the deserted saloon bar he had a private word with the landlord. Yes, he remembered the young gentleman well. Well-set-up young man, and pleasantly spoken. Bread-and-cheese he had, and a pint of bitter. . . Couldn't say as he noticed anything particular about him, there wasn't anything to notice. . . Asked a question or two about Northwood House——

"Northwood House?"

The Colonel learned as much of Northwood House and its occupants as the landlord could tell him, which was not a lot, and in default of anything more promising he and Peters motored out from the village to reconnoitre.

"Doesn't look a very likely place," the Colonel said as they sped up the winding and forlorn-looking drive.

JOE THE COOT

and, in truth, Northwood House made a barren and unattractive picture in the semi-darkness of the early evening

Not a light was showing anywhere, and there was no response to the Colonel's vigorous tuggings at the bell and knocking on the front door. A visit to the back produced a no more hopeful result, and all the windows and the doors were shut

"What do you make of it, Peters?"

"No one here, sir. Looks as though they've shut the place up and gone."

The Colonel nodded "May as well have a look round the grounds," he said "You never know what we might find"

In five minutes' time they were both standing in a large empty shed with an arched roof

"Good-sized garage, sir," Peters commented.

"Yes—if it is a garage Looks more like a hangar to me," the Colonel said, and he walked out on to the lawn The darkness made it difficult to see anything now, but the Colonel produced a pocket torch, and directed its light on to the ground.

"See that?" he asked.

In the focused rays of the torch a heavy wheel-mark was distinctly visible, flattening the grass and running out across the lawn A similar one ran parallel to it

"Ever see a car with only two wheels?" the Colonel said "That's the mark of a 'plane, and a heavy one, and I'll take my oath it hasn't very long taken off, either Well, that's that It looks as though the birds have literally flown now Come on'" He snapped off the torch, and led the way back to the car in the drive.

As they passed through Tong on the way back to London the evening papers had just arrived, and the Colonel had a sudden desire to see one. They halted by the tiny stationer's shop, and under the uncertain light of an antiquated gas street-lamp the Colonel skimmed through *The News*.

He saw nothing in the headlines to interest him; they were full of the coming Peace Pact and of Verney's improved condition. The Colonel smiled sardonically as he read those, and turned the pages quickly in search of what he was really looking for. He found it soon enough, and it made him laugh. The news ran:

ROBBERY AT MADAME TUSSAUD'S

AUDACIOUS THEFT UNDER SCORES OF EYES

Early this afternoon a most unusual robbery was carried out at the famous waxworks exhibition of Madame Tussaud's. While dozens of people were in various parts of the building a man dressed in some sort of uniform walked into the main chamber, picked up the wax figure of Mr Paul Verney which has lately been added to the exhibition, and calmly took it away down the stairs and out of the building into a waiting motor-car. Quite a number of people saw the theft committed, but all of them thought the thief was an employe of Madame Tussaud's acting under lawful instructions. The attendants on duty in the hall were likewise deceived by the man's boldness and assurance, and did not wake up to the true facts of the case until it was too late. The thief put the model into a car, and drove rapidly away. The police are understood to have the matter in hand, and the only motive suggested for such an action is that it is the work of some fanatic with an imaginary grievance against Mr Verney and the great cause of European peace for which he stands.

JOE THE COOT

The Colonel laughed as he read that, but the laugh died from his face when by chance he happened to catch sight of a letter in the correspondence column.

DEAR SIR,

Every one must sympathize with an overworked man in time of sickness, but on the other hand every one will feel it doubly unfortunate that Mr Verney should be confined to his room at this present juncture. Such a thing as diplomatic sickness is not unknown, and it would be comforting, not to say reassuring, to the man in the street if Mr Verney could make just one short public appearance to show us that he really is here ready to carry out his mission.

HENRY LOWOOD

38 FITZWARREN AVENUE, N W.3

The Colonel put his paper away, and stared at the ground. He knew well enough that the letter was written by no Mr Henry Lowood of Fitzwarren Avenue. Neither such a man nor such an address, the Colonel was prepared to swear, even existed. This was the beginning of the attack, so cunning and so insidious as to be beyond suspicion to the ordinary man, and yet doing what it wanted to do—planting the first tiny seeds of doubt in the public mind.

"Anything up, sir?" Peters asked at last.

"No. Let's get back," the Colonel said gruffly, climbing into the car once more. But his face belied him. He fancied he could hear the first blows of Bluefeather's pick against the walls of civilization.

CHAPTER XI

THE ISLAND

THE Doctor had handled his sleeping-draught, one of the most potent and dangerous of its kind, as efficiently as he did everything else, and for fifteen hours George lay in deep slumber such as only the extremity of fatigue or drugs can induce.

When he awoke he was bewildered and fogged, he clutched desperately at the confused skirts of consciousness in an endeavour to remember what had happened and where he was. The uppermost thought in his mind was that he had a headache which seemed like a live creature of pain inside his head, trying to claw its way out. He was content for a long time to lie with his eyes closed and his whole being throbbing in unison with the pain that split his temples. His mouth tasted as though it was lined with a mixture of treacle and sawdust, and altogether George Stanhope Berkley felt in pretty poor shape.

But he was a young man, and fundamentally as fit as a fiddle; and even before he himself realized it the natural resilience of his body was gaining ground steadily against the poison that was still in him.

Beyond the fact that he was in bed George took precious little note of his whereabouts until the door of his room opened and some one came in.

His visitor was the ex-pug, on whom he had already left his mark in Burton Mews, and at the sight of him the disconnected fragments of memory that were flout

ing about elusively in George's mind came together with a click. He remembered all the events of the previous day—Tong and Northwood House and the smooth-spoken owner.

The ex-pug was carrying a tray, which he set down on a small table. He was evidently torn between dislike at waiting on George and a desire to gloat over him.

"Feeling nice and bright this morning?" he asked, with an unpleasant leer. In his weak state George found the man's features so definitely repulsive that he closed his eyes. "No good kidding you're asleep."

"I'm merely saving myself the unpleasantness of looking at you," George answered.

The man grinned maliciously. "Maybe after a few days alone up 'ere you'll be glad of anyone to look at," he said, walking towards the door.

"I hope you've brought some more sticking-plaster with you," George said. "Perhaps you'll need it before long."

He had evidently touched on a sore point, for the ex-pug swung round and snarled. "If there's any sticking-plaster wanted 'ere, my young cock, it'll be you as wants it. You'll be lucky if the Doctor doesn't make you scream yer heart out", and on this unamiable leave-taking he went out, slamming and locking the door behind him.

"A very nasty piece of work," George reflected. "but I touched him up once, and, by gad, I'll touch him up again if I get half a chance."

A pot of tea, a cup, and four slices of thick bread-and-butter on a plate were all that the tray contained. He fell on these ravenously, and the hot, strong tea was like nectar to his parched mouth. He drained the pot dry, and ate the bread-and-butter to the last crumb, and he felt

infinitely better. His only regret was that the ration had not been double; but he reflected wryly that, wherever he was, it would not be much use ringing the bell and asking for more.

He felt disinclined to smoke; in fact, all that first day of his imprisonment he went without tobacco, a voluntary abstinence of which he was to be unbelievably glad later on.

With the tea and food inside him, and his head a great deal clearer, he began to take intelligent stock of his surroundings.

He was in bed, dressed except for boots and coat, in what was evidently an attic room. His coat lay on a table near the bed, but of his boots there was no sign. He searched patiently but unsuccessfully for them throughout the entire room, until he was forced to the conclusion that they had been deliberately taken away, and the conclusion did nothing to cheer him up. A man feels something like 50 per cent under normal fighting strength in stockinged feet. However, stockinged feet were evidently the order of the day, and he had to be philosophical about it.

The room in which he was took no time to examine. Either habitually or by design to deal with his particular case, it was bare to the limits of practicability. The bedstead was a cheap iron one; the walls were distempered, and innocent of pictures or nails. There was a single small window, heavily barred; and the door, which looked a stout oak affair, was locked. Let into a recess in one wall a washstand, with primitive sanitary arrangements attached, and beyond this the solitary item of furniture was the small round table standing by the bed.

The ceiling was in true attic style, being low, and con

forming to the exterior lines of the roof, but it was bare of trapdoor or skylight.

In ten minutes George had examined that small room pretty thoroughly, and it depressed him. For want of anything else to do he examined it at intervals during the long day, and each time it depressed him more.

He paid particular attention to the bars at the window, with vague memories at the back of his mind of wonderful things alleged to have been done with bent forks and miraculously secreted nails, but actually an iron bar with a diameter of a quarter of an inch takes a lot of cutting through, and, as George reflected, even if the bars were by some marvel all cut away there still remained the problem of reaching the ground, and not being "a bird or a blooming angel," as he reminded himself, there didn't seem to be much hope that way.

The view from the window was singularly uninteresting: a field, and beyond that a thick wood of young larch-trees, were all it yielded, and George soon got tired of staring at these. He was puzzled for a long time by the continuous undercurrent of noise, like a deep-pitched *bourdonnement*, that went on continuously, and it was not for some hours that he realized it must be the sea. He concluded that the house must be on the coast somewhere, and, indeed, the limited view he had from the one small window was windswept and melancholy enough to endorse such a theory.

Towards midday, as he guessed by the position of the sun, for his watch was still useless, he was visited by the Doctor.

That dapper little man, with his soft voice and ironically obsequious manners, was politeness itself. His politeness even extended to begging George, in his own

interest, to do nothing rash "Personally I hate violence, young man," the Doctor cooed, "and in this case it would be futile. You see, there are five men in the house—six, indeed, if we count the excellent Trenner—and you wouldn't stand a chance, really you wouldn't. If you are sensible and don't give any trouble possibly no harm will come to you. If you turn awkward and obstinate, as Englishmen are inclined to do, we should be forced to use different methods."

Although his voice did not change at all during these last few words he shot a glance out of those pale, fanatical eyes that George did not like at all. George felt a clammy, cold feeling in the presence of this smooth-tongued man whom even the Colonel had spoken of with something like fear in his voice. "Well, maybe you'll scare me stiff as a crow," thought George, "but if you think I'm going to take it all lying down you're backing the wrong horse altogether." Aloud, and for the sole purpose of annoying the Doctor, he said, "Well, you didn't get Mr Verney after all."

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. "And what do you know of our intentions with regard to Mr Verney?" was all he asked.

"Maybe more than you think. But I know you didn't carry them out, because he is back in his suite at Clarence's."

"Zo!" The man gave the soft laugh which irritated George more every time he heard it. "And what makes you so certain of that, O well-informed young man?"

"Merely the fact that I was told so in person by Mr Verney's own private secretary," George replied. "So laugh that off."

The Doctor smiled, nodding gravely to himself as a

condescending adult might, listening to the words of a child

"Go on nodding, you Chinese mandarin!" George thought furiously. "You'll nod once too often yet, you see"

"But you killed young Graham Rivers," he said suddenly.

One more nod was given "Yes," the smooth voice agreed instantly, "we killed that young fool I regret that—not the fact that Rivers has ceased to exist—that is nothing to me one way or the other, absolutely nothing—but while your plans are yet making it is a mistake to kill unnecessarily. It gives one just a little extra trouble in covering up one's tracks from your stupid police"

"Maybe they are not all so stupid as you imagine" George said lightly. "In any case, you are keeping me here unlawfully, and you will find it a good deal wiser to let me go at once."

It seemed for a moment as though an electric spark had galvanized the Doctor, and the words which poured out came in a cold, savage whisper stripped of any make-pretence at pleasantness

"You young fool!" he snarled "Don't dare to tell me what's wise and what is not! You are here because you were fool enough to poke your head into business that is none of yours, and because you may possibly be of some slight use to me You will stay here just as long as I wish, and when I have finished with you you will go in the way I decide Here there are none of your vaunted police to look after you You will stay here until that is done which is to be done until all your Western world is ablaze from sea to sea, until everything in it—your kings and your princes, your Parliaments

ODDS ON BLUEFEATHER

and your democracies—are dust beneath our feet: until nothing is left of Europe but the ash-heap of its own making.”

All this was said in hardly more than a whisper, and the fire burning in the words was intensified by the inhuman light which blazed in the pale, fanatical eyes.

The man swept from the room without saying more: and long after the sound of the slammed door and the turned key had died away into silence George sat on his bed with his heart still racing a little.

He had had a glimpse of what the Colonel had warned him lay beneath the man's exterior. ‘Cold, detached evil, as ruthless as a god—or a devil’—the words came back to him now, and he did not like the memory of them.

THE ISLAND

Burton Mews came in on what was evidently a round of inspection. He came up to the bed and peered at George by the light of a hurricane lantern which he carried.

"Gone to roost, eh, me young gamecock?" he chuckled. "P'raps four or five days of this will take yer temperature down a bit."

George said nothing, but long after the man had left the room, and long after the clumping of his heavy feet had died away along the corridor, he lay there thinking—lay there thinking while the moon, which was near the full, rose, and flooded the room with magic light, mysterious, elfish, doubly tantalizing to a prisoner.

"Another four or five days!" thought George ruefully. "Four or five days of this will send me mad." He lay there thinking, and, as nearly always happens when a man concentrates on a problem sufficiently, the germ of an idea came to him at last. He was on the borderland of sleep when the idea occurred to him, and almost immediately he lost consciousness. He dreamed of the impossibly successful triumph of his plan; but, fantastic though his dreams seemed, they were hardly to be belied by the fantastic truth that lay in store for him.

While darkness and cold and the total lack of anything to do had driven George to bed, two storeys below, in a warm and lamplit room, six people sat eating.

The room looked exactly what it had once been, the kitchen living-room of a farmhouse. A huge log fire blazed in the grate, and three lamps on wall-brackets supplied the light. A long, wide table was the principal piece of furniture, and on this, almost covering the snow-white cloth, was an abundance of homely food.

The six people who sat there were divided into two

groups. At one end of the table the Doctor sat, on his right hand was the woman of Burton Mews, on his left big-shouldered Lodder. Towards the middle of the long table, and sufficiently far away from the first three for the differentiation to be well marked, were grouped thin-faced Bauer, Carl, and the ex-pugilist.

These three ate more than they they talked, and drank more than they did either, for a barrel of beer was at their disposal, and doing justice to that was safer than letting their tongues wag in the presence of the thin-lipped, sardonic devil who sat at the top of the table, and whose eye seemed always to be on every one at once. But Lodder talked bravely. There was something colossal about the man, so that if he did a thing he seemed incapable of doing it except on a big, blustering scale.

The six people were waited on by a girl. She could not have been more than twenty-two or -three at the outside, and the hard life lived by the daughter of a Cornish fisherman had done nothing to destroy her natural beauty. Rather, the salt winds and the sun had added to her native grace, and, as with many Cornish folk, there was a hint of the South about her, something dark and dignified and barbaric.

She was efficient in what she did, yet she seemed to take little enough personal interest in the people whom she served. Yet every now and again her dark eyes rested for a moment on the big, broad-shouldered bull who was doing most of the talking, and whenever they did so the eyes of the man were ready, waiting.

And not a single one of those glances passed between the two without the woman seated at the table being aware of it.

THE ISLAND

"You are very quiet, Hilda," the Doctor said once in his smooth undertone, and the woman, almost as smoothly, and with her eyes elsewhere, replied, "Am I? I was thinking"

When the meal was finished and cigarettes were being lit Lodder found that he had mislaid his pipe.

His way to get it led him past the entrance to what was formerly the scullery, and was now used as a kitchen. In the doorway, tray in hand, stood the girl who had waited on them.

"You gave us a good dinner, Grace," boomed Lodder.

"You enjoyed it?" she asked.

"I'd have enjoyed it a sight more if you and I had been alone," he laughed. Something in her eyes warned him to turn. At the other end of the corridor, silent and watching, stood Hilda. Lodder looked at her for some seconds, she neither moved nor spoke. With a shrug of his great shoulders he turned, and, chucking Grace under the chin, went laughing on his way.

CHAPTER XII

WORK WITH A PEN-KNIFE

GEORGE woke early next morning. A night's sound sleep had restored him to normal, and he felt less inclined than ever to spend several days as a prisoner without at least making a wholehearted attempt to escape.

As usually happens the plan which had appealed tremendously to his half-awake senses the night before wore a somewhat different complexion in the cold light of morning; but, on the other hand, he saw no alternative to it, and it at any rate offered a chance of action.

As on the first day, breakfast of sorts was brought to him quite early by the ex-pug, and to that individual's sardonic inquiry as to how he felt George answered briefly, "Rotten"; but as soon as he was alone again he polished off his breakfast in great style, and set about putting his plan into action.

He judged, from what had happened on the previous day, that he would have at least a couple of hours undisturbed, and in any case he had already learned that the sound of approaching footsteps down the corridor which led to his room gave him a certain amount of warning. So with one ear cocked all the time he felt in his waistcoat pocket and drew out a two-bladed pen-knife. It was a cheap affair and looked a singularly inadequate means of winning his freedom, but he refused to be disheartened, and, having opened the larger blade, he gave his attention to the table which, besides the bed and the washstand, was the solitary piece of furniture in the room.

This table stood some three feet high, and consisted of a circular top attached to a single central leg. It was this leg that attracted George. It was a good solid piece of mahogany about five inches in diameter, and if he could detach it from the table-top it would prove a very useful weapon.

Unfortunately for him the table had been made long before the era of mass-produced furniture. It was something that had been built to last, and it gave every indication of carrying out its maker's intention. However, George realized that it was no good being daunted at the outset, and, squatting on the floor, he turned the table upside down and began to work at it.

His plan was to cut right through the mahogany leg as close to the underside of the table-top as he could, and with that end in view he began to cut a V-shaped nick all the way round it.

Ten minutes' work made him realize what a job he had taken on, and when he thought that a half a crown saw would have solved his problem for him in a quarter of an hour he could almost have cried with exasperation. There was nothing for it but to peg away, cut by cut, each cut bringing out a wretched little shaving of wood.

He kept his handkerchief lying by his side, and as soon as a dozen chips of wood lay on the floor he ceased cutting and meticulously swept them all out of sight under the bed.

The wood was old and hard, and the knife sadly blunted, so that often enough it needed all the pressure he could bring to bear on the blade to make an impression at all. For all this he kept steadily at work, carefully brushing his little pile of chips away each

in with his meals. On these occasions George kept his hands in his pockets, and refused to talk, and on the second of them, while the ex-pug was actually in the room, he was horrified to notice a large spot of blood on the bare floor by the bed. It must have escaped his attention while he was sweeping the chips away, and for a second his heart stood still. He dared not look again, but he made certain that the ex-pug was staring at it, and would begin to ask awkward questions any minute, and in a desperate effort to distract the man's attention he crossed to the window and made some fatuous remark about the view.

The ex-pugilist laughed in his unpleasant way. "It's the inside view you'll be worrying about for the next day or two, me young cock," he said, "so I wouldn't trouble too much about what's beyond."

George smiled. "I'm happy enough up here," he pointed out, "as long as you bring up the grub regularly," but inwardly he backed himself heavily to be out of the room a good deal before his gaoler allowed for

When he was alone again he took stock of things. By the failing light he knew it to be late afternoon. He had made good progress in cutting through the leg, but a lot of hard core-wood remained; and, worst of all, the little blade of his knife, his sole remaining hope, was showing signs of bad wear. At every cut he expected it to snap as the big one had, and it was tantalizing having to curb his energy to suit his tool.

The last light of the afternoon went quickly, and still he worked steadily on in the darkness. Cut after patient cut, sometimes no more than a mere shaving of wood coming away, sometimes nothing at all, constantly an

ominous feeling of 'give' in the sorely overtaxed blade. His fingers were sore, and his cut still bled intermittently, so that he had constantly to be stopping work to mop up the spots of blood. It was a race of time and the hardness of the wood against a thin piece of steel that was never intended for such a job, and the race was decided dramatically when the little blade gave up the ghost and snapped in two.

The only crumb of comfort George could pick out of the situation was that he had luckily not cut himself afresh. He held up the table to the window, and examined it by what light there was. About three-quarters of an inch of solid mahogany remained. Cutting was now out of the question, and in desperation he had to try another plan. He laid the table on the floor, so that it rested on the rim of the top and on the foot of the mahogany leg. Then, praying that it would not make too much noise, he stepped on to the partially severed part of the leg and bore all his weight there. For a half minute nothing happened: then his twelve stone was too much for it, and with what seemed to him to be an appalling splintering and crashing the leg came away from the top, and he descended on to the floor.

George stood stock-still for a couple of minutes, every nerve taut, convinced that some one would come hurrying to see what had happened: but as the minutes went by and nothing came to break the silence he allowed himself—hardly daring to do so—to believe that the noise had gone unheard.

He picked up the mahogany leg in triumph. It came easily to his grasp, and the mere feel of it gave him confidence. Then, putting it on one side, he hurried about the rest of his plan.

First the table-top and all trace of splinters were swept out of sight; then he stuffed the pillow into the bed, and, rolling his waistcoat up into a bundle, arranged it so that it peeped over the bedclothes like the dark hair of a man's head.

Half a dozen times he went to the door, studied the effect, and, not satisfied, tried to better it by some rearrangement. He would have given a king's ransom to have had another pillow to pad things out a bit, but he kept comforting himself by the memory of how often the same ruse had succeeded at school, and for an instant George had a curious feeling. Schoolboy pranks seemed a long way from this dark room, with the thin-lipped Doctor below, and God alone knew what other dangers to be met. It was as near a prayer as George had got for a long time when he said audibly to himself, "I've got something on my plate to get out of this lot; but, please God, I'll have a damned good cut at it!"

At last he felt that his dummy was as good as he could make it, and even his hypercritical eye had to admit an astounding realism in the figure as seen through the darkness from the door. He was not a moment too soon, for noisy footsteps down the corridor warned him that his gaoler was coming round on his evening visit of inspection already. George gave a last-minute pat to the dummy, and, grasping the stout mahogany leg, took his stand behind the door.

He could have sworn that the ex-pug took ten long minutes to walk down that corridor instead of half as many seconds. But at last a feeble gleam of light showed beneath the door, and the key turned gratingly in its wards.

George's mouth was dry, and his heart hammered

against his ribs. The door was pushed open, so that it swung back, concealing him, and the man took a pace or two into the room, and held up his hurricane lantern to see the better. In that second George felt as though his legs had turned to water, for a fraction of time he was paralysed, incapable of action. Then the man, perhaps because he was not satisfied, began to move forward, and George acted.

With two quick steps and a jump he was on him, and the faithful lump of mahogany caught the man a blow at the base of his thick skull that knocked all the senses out of him like wind blows out a candle. He went down in a heap, and George was more conscious of the clatter of the hurricane lamp than of anything else. He darted forward, picked the lamp up intact, and waited, breathing in quick, sharp gasps. He felt paralysed and nervous no longer, action was on him, and he revelled in it.

He stood there listening intently, but there was no sign that the noise had been heard outside. The house was a big rambling one, like many ancient farmhouses, and what went on in the top story did not often reach the ears of those below.

George smiled grimly to himself in the darkness. "Round number one to me, I think," he said, and, bending down, he proceeded to put the next steps of his carefully thought-out plan into operation. First of all he undid the man's shoes and, tying the laces together, slung them round his neck. Next, with the aid of the sheet and his handkerchief he made a good job of binding the man's wrists and ankles and gagging him. Then he picked up his waistcoat, slipped it on, and, moving out of the room, locked the door quietly behind him.

He had no idea of what he proposed to do next but he cared little enough about that. An action boldly conceived and successfully carried out puts heart into an army or a single man, and George entered the unknown campaign before him with the inestimable advantage of initial success

For all that his heart was racing as he tiptoed down the dark corridor, and he started half a dozen times when the ancient floorboards creaked beneath his careful feet. He discovered a door at the end of the corridor by the simple expedient of walking into it, and to his relief it gave on to a landing, where an oil-lamp burned on a wall-bracket. Feeble as this illumination was, it was better than total darkness, and he halted for a minute to take stock of his surroundings

The landing was bare and uninformative enough and the light did not show much of the staircase beyond the first half-dozen steps. There was nothing for it but to go down the stairs and explore, and, treading as gingerly as he could, George began the descent. He muttered a dozen blistering oaths against all age-warped, worm-eaten wood as tread after tread creaked noisily under his weight, but he reached the mid-stair turn, and had actually set foot on the next landing, before he caught a sound from the house. Then he heard a door-handle turning, and he stood there statue-still, looking up the long corridor dimly lit by the oil-lamp at its far end. "The big brute or the Doctor?" he wondered, and he took a fresh grasp on his trusty mahogany club, determined to make a scrap of it whoever it was.

The door opened, and a shaft of light was momentarily thrown across the corridor. A man came out of the room, and George swallowed his spittle. 'Now for it!'

he thought. But the man shut the door behind him, turned the other way, and walked, all unsuspecting, along the corridor and through a door at its far end. It was the dapper little Doctor, but George thought of him as dapper and polite no longer; he remembered the man's pale, fanatical eyes and the horrible obscenities scrawled over the walls of Northwood House on which those eyes had feasted. The door at the far end of the corridor closed, and George ran his tongue over dry lips. This silent stalking in the dark and eerie house was proving a bit of a strain.

"So that's where the Paris postcard maniac has his burrow, is it?" he muttered. "Dashed if I don't have a squint in there!" He went quickly along the corridor, and, opening the door of the room which the Doctor had just left, went cautiously in.

Here were no bare walls or hard furniture. Whatever other people had to put up with, the Doctor evidently believed in comfort for himself. A beautiful marquetry desk stood in the middle of the room, and two luxurious armchairs were disposed on either side of a huge, old-fashioned fireplace, in which a log fire blazed. At the far end of the room hung a heavy tapestry curtain, and the whole atmosphere of the place was one of comfort and ease.

There was something above the mantelshelf that caught George's eye at once—a small, silk-lined case hung on the wall, and in the case, alive with the splendour of reflected firelight, was the symbol, the single feather, beautifully modelled and proportioned, blue with the brilliance of a hundred sapphires.

From what the Colonel had told him George knew that this was the sign that was to raise the East. Under

this blazing symbol, which cunning minds had perverted from its original religious and pacific meaning, the teeming hordes of the East were to be poured into Europe when the moment was ripe. For all his knowledge of the thing and of the perverted use to which it was to be put, it fascinated George. It held his eye, and he could have sworn that there was life in those glittering stones.

It held his eye very nearly too long, for he was suddenly aware of footsteps and voices in the corridor, coming all too quickly towards the Doctor's room.

George glanced round desperately. There was no suggestion of cover save that offered by the heavy curtain at the far end of the room, and, quick as lightning, he crossed the floor, and, plucking the curtain to one side, stepped behind it. Nor was he a second too soon, in fact, it seemed to him that the curtain was still shaking slightly when the door opened, and he prayed heaven that it would pass unnoticed.

In a flash every other thought except pure astonishment was driven out of his head, for the Doctor had not come alone into the room. With him, and, it seemed, taking little enough interest in his polite chatter, was another man. And at the sight of that other man George all but cried aloud in amazement, for the other man was Paul Verney himself!

George was bewildered. "What the suffering cats was that ass Stathers bleating about?" he said to himself, and he kept his eye glued to the crack in the curtains to miss nothing of what was to come.

The doctor bowed Verney to a chair with exaggerated courtesy, and it was evident from his bearing and tone of speech throughout that Paul Verney was in the position of a well-treated prisoner. George could not help

being struck by the nobility of that face as the man sat there, calm and unmoved by all the veiled taunts and nicely wrapped-up insults of the Doctor's speech.

Once when the Doctor asked him what hope he had of obtaining any help Verney answered, in all simplicity, "I hope in Providence. I do not think Providence wishes the evil things in the world to triumph, and that is sufficient for me."

The Doctor laughed, and was instantly apologetic. "You must excuse me, Mr Verney," his smooth voice said, "if I find your pathetic belief in exploded superstitions amusing. I'm afraid your much-taunted Providence will require some rather more practical assistance if it is to be of any use to you here."

"And, by the Lord," George thought behind his curtain. "if I don't give Providence a hand I'm a Dutchman!" His fingers closed lovingly round his club of mahogany, which had already done yeoman service. Just one smart crack on the back of that sleek, sardonic head appealed to him as the most desirable thing in the world at the moment. His muscles were actually braced for the attack when there was a sudden tap at the door, and without waiting for an answer Lodder came in.

He took no notice of the Doctor's sarcastic "Come in!" and with one eye on Verney said, "Can I have a word with you?"

"As many as you like, my dear Lodder."

"Outside in the corridor would be best, I think."

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps you will excuse me, Mr Verney?" he begged. "I only hope you won't be bored for a minute or so," and, rising from his chair, he followed Lodder out of the room.

George was through the curtains almost as soon as the door closed. Verney looked up startled, and would have spoken, but George had a finger on his lips, cautioning absolute silence. He crossed to the window and drew back the curtain. There was moonlight outside now, and in the moonlight he saw something that gladdened his heart. No three feet below the window a lean-to roof sloped away from the house. He was not a second in making up his mind. Here was their best, indeed their only, chance of escape. He opened the window as quietly as he could, and with a word in Verney's ear—"I'm from the Colonel. Come on!"—the two men began to move.

Reluctantly George decided to leave his faithful mahogany table-leg behind, he thought that speed was going to be more important than fight in the immediate future. Stopping only long enough to pull the ex-pug's shoes on his feet in some fashion, he stepped out of the window on to the roof below. Verney followed with admirable promptness.

"Quietly as you can," George whispered, "and mind the drop at the bottom," and, suiting the action to the word, he began to slither down the fairly steep-pitched roof.

Much as he tried to put a brake on, he was travelling at a good pace when he reached the roof-edge, and he had to make a half jump, half fall, landing as best he could.

It was a fall of some six feet, but luckily he landed in a flower-bed, and beyond a shaking and an unpleasant mouthful of soil he was none the worse for it. Verney by his side had made much the same journey, and to George's whispered, "Hurt?" he shook his head and

laughed, as though he saw the whole thing in the light of a huge practical joke.

The laugh struck George as being incongruous, and faintly annoyed him. Personally he did not think there was going to be any fun at all in being hauled back to the tender mercies of the bull-shouldered Lodder or, worse still, the thin-lipped Doctor.

He scrambled to his feet and, with a terse "Well, if you've never run in your life before, for God's sake, run now!" started off.

In spite of the moonlight George in his hurry made a bad start by getting mixed up with some old and damnably tenacious rose-bushes, but once he had got rid of these at the expense of some terrific scratches he made good time across a neglected lawn, and, pushing his way through a belt of sorry laurels, gained what was evidently the drive to the house.

Down this he put on a great turn of speed, and he was relieved, and surprised, to find that Verney easily kept pace with him.

The drive sloped away from the house and turned behind sheltering trees, and it was not long before they came to the ancient white gate that marked its end. George had no idea whether to turn right or left, but, speed being the immediate *desideratum*, he chose the way that still led downhill, and, swinging right-handed increased his pace.

They were running on a grassy track, which failed to improve as they progressed, and George kept wondering when they were going to strike a road; but, like a wise man, he kept his breath for running, and asked no questions. But when the track lost itself in a heathlike wilderness that was neither pasture nor good ploughland,

and which offered no definite character or landmarks, he called a halt. They had run the best part of a mile, and for all his fitness George was blowing like a grampus, but Verney by his side seemed hardly distressed at all, and George looked at him with added interest.

"Seem to have turned the wrong way," he said between his laboured breaths.

"I don't know," Verney answered, "I don't think it matters much."

"P'raps not. Anyway, if we keep dead on in a straight line we're bound to strike something, a road or a railway, soon."

"I doubt it. We're on an island."

"The devil we are!" George cried.

"Yes. Pretty small place too from what they said."

"Still, there's bound to be something here, a small town or village."

"I don't think so. The Doctor owns the island himself, I believe."

"You mean, it's uninhabited except for his crew?"

"So he gave me to understand."

George whistled quietly; things were beginning to take on a very different complexion, and he was not at all sure that he liked their new aspect. The fact that there were as yet no signs of pursuit from the farmhouse ceased to seem so favourable. If what Verney said was true, and they were on some small uninhabited island off the coast, there was no need for the Doctor to go to all the trouble of a night search. His quarry could not escape, and he might just as well wait till daylight, and do the job in style and comfort.

"How far are we off the mainland?" George asked.

"No idea. We might be any distance up to fifty miles I suppose. We came by aeroplane, you know."

George nodded. "Well, we'd better keep on for a bit," he said, "and do the best we can for ourselves. Are you game?"

Verney was ready instantly, and together they walked across the boggy heath into which their grass-track had led them. George steered as straight a track as he could by the Plough, but clouds were blowing up in the freshening breeze, and the sky was continually being obscured.

However, he could see sufficient to be sure that they were not doubling on their tracks, and with hardly a word spoken between them they kept on at a steady pace. The going was rough, and the ill-fitting shoes George was wearing were growing more and more painful, but he was determined to put the farmhouse a good distance behind, and kept joggedly at it.

After descending into a miniature valley and getting soaked crossing a burn at its bottom they climbed a little on the other side, and suddenly found themselves in a dense wood. The sky was overcast now, and it was a job to see more than a foot or two on either hand, and after stumbling for five minutes through the trees and tripping once or twice in the tangled undergrowth George decided he had had enough of it. They had reached a rough sort of clearing, where the bole of a big tree, felled long since, lay athwart the moss and bracken. It seemed as good a place to stop as any and they were both glad to sit down, leaning against the fallen tree-trunk.

George lit a cigarette with infinite relish, but Verney would not smoke. They agreed that while one slept the

other was to keep watch for any signs of pursuit, and since Verney had a wrist-watch it was decided that they should do two hours on guard and two sleeping, turn and turn about in regular Army fashion.

They had no food with them, but both had eaten recently at the farmhouse, and they were not hungry. George was astonished at Verney's calm indifference as to what happened. It humiliated and annoyed him.

After they had talked a little Verney said he would sleep, and as a preparation for it he knelt, and remained in prayer for some five or six minutes.

The moon came mistily through the driven cloud-rack, and George thought it was a strange sight in that wood clearing to see the strong, noble face of the man to whom all Europe turned for deliverance lifted up to the silent skies in prayer.

When Verney had finished he said, "I do not think God intends us to be killed here, on this island, at the hands of these men, but we must play our part. And if we are to play it properly we must have a captain. You are younger than I, and more used to action. You must take command, and I agree to follow your decisions. I do not think we need fear; my destiny is not to die here."

Five minutes later, curled in as comfortable a position as was possible against the tree-trunk, he was fast asleep.

At his side George sat awake and wary. He was thinking, and his thoughts were troubled. He admired coolness and courage in a crisis as much as the next man, but practical experience had taught him that they were not everything. "Come down to brass tacks," he told himself, "we're in a hell of a mess. We've no food and

no knowledge of the island, and that sarcastic maniac of a Doctor will be after us like a ferret through a cony burrow to-morrow. Well, let him come," George thought, his mouth taking on a grim line; "but I'll show him a trick or two yet, never fear."

CHAPTER XIII

UP A TREE

GEORGE slept but little that night. Although there was no frost, March in northern regions is no month for a man to sleep out of doors without overcoat or shelter, and he spent a good deal of his time on guard tramping up and down to keep himself warm.

There were no signs of any pursuit, and except for the tiny noises of the wild and the occasional startling clamour of an owl everything was quiet and still.

Not infrequently George saw the dawn in London when on his way home from some nocturnal diversion, but here, in the clearing in the trees, with nothing about him save nature and the things of the wild, the dawn he had seen struggling between the tall houses and chimneys of London Town seemed a poor, captive sort of thing. Here the new day came grandly into an expectant sky, dark giving place to ghostly glimmerings of grey, and grey yielding to delicate olive-green, that merged into the palest yellow, until the eastern sky seemed to be made of liquid light, and all the world stood newly revealed under the miracle of morning.

George touched Verney on the shoulder, and that strange man was awake instantly.

"Daren't wait any longer," George said. "They'll be through this place with a fine comb to-day, and we've got to get out of sight somewhere."

The night in the open had made them both cold and stiff, and the first quarter of an hour's walking was

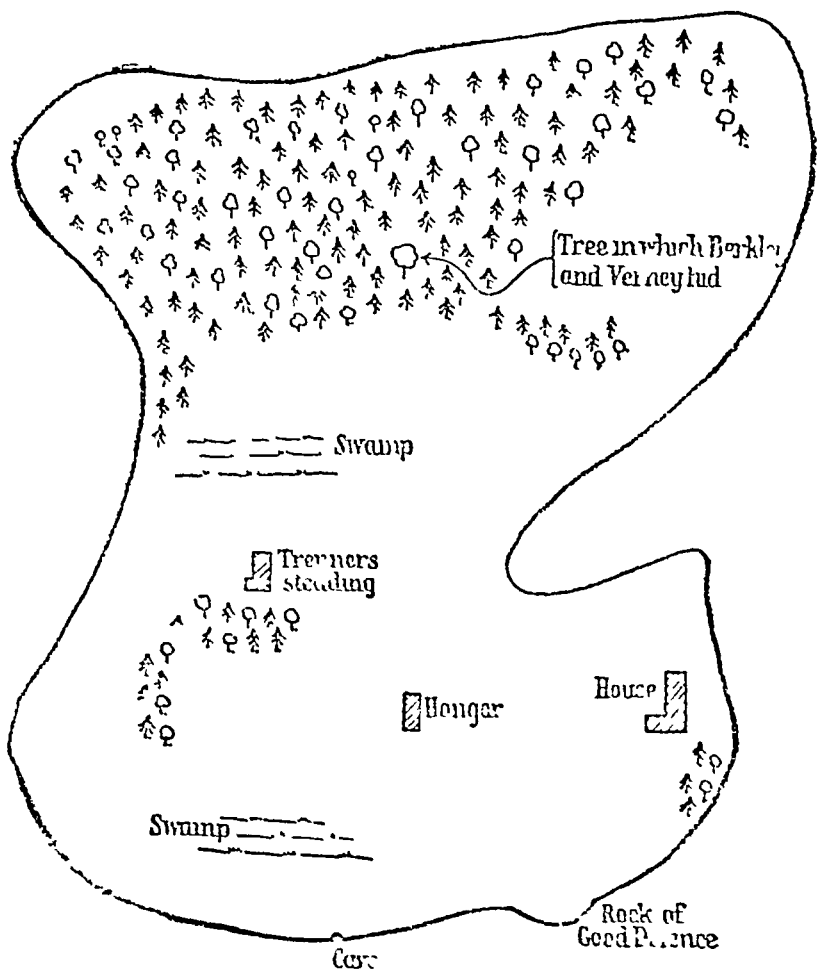
painful in the extreme, but George kept moving. He had taken a very strong dislike to Lodder, and the maniac who was Lodder's master—indeed, to the whole Bluefeather gang—and in a pigheaded, John Bull sort of way he had made a personal quarrel of the thing. He took an oath that the farmhouse people would have their work cut out to find him and Verney that day.

His hours spent on guard had not been fruitless, for he had mapped out a plan of campaign, and he was now bent on putting it into practice.

As they went forward the wood got progressively denser, until they had difficulty in making any sort of headway. George was beginning to despair of finding what he wanted when all at once his eye fell on the very thing.

"Hold hard!" he cried to Verney, and the two of them halted at the foot of a large oak. Not only was it a big tree, with plenty of widespread limbs, but its massive trunk and lower branches were covered with a dense growth of ivy. George cast a critical eye on it. "If we can get well up that," he said, "they'll have a job to find us." Verney, who seemed content to leave all question of leadership to the younger man, agreed, and without loss of time George set about the ascent.

It was hard going at first—a shin-scraping, trousers-tearing business over the rough bark—but George stuck at it, determined to have a good hiding-place, and after about ten minutes they both managed to get up to a height of some thirty feet. Here a forking of branches made a sort of natural seat, where there was room for them both in some degree of comfort, and after a prolonged inspection all round George declared himself satisfied.



ROUGH SKETCH OF FRIDAY ISLAND

Not only did the ivy on the lower branches afford good cover, but they were well screened from ground view by the Scotch firs and spruce that grew all round

"Not exactly a palace," George said

"Still, a king did once hide in an oak-tree," Verney reminded him.

"True enough," George grinned "And if it was good enough for King Charles it will have to do for us By gad, I could do with some breakfast."

Verney smiled. "I dare say we shall feel the need of a meal before the day's out," he said.

George thought so too He also thought that it wouldn't be his fault if they didn't get one, but he kept his counsel, and said nothing.

Telling Verney to make himself as comfortable as he could, he began to inspect the higher branches above them, and before long he was climbing again

He had set his heart on reaching a promising-looking fork some fifteen feet higher up, and after a deal of trouble, during which his heart was in his mouth more than once, he managed to scramble to it. When he got there his delight made him call quietly to Verney below him

He was high enough now to see over most of the surrounding trees, and there was a sort of lane in their waving tops through which, to his joy, he had a clear view of the farmhouse, and, indeed, of most of the island.

It was an uncomfortable stance, for he had to brace himself in position all the time with his right foot. but George would cheerfully have stood on a row of red-hot pins to get that particular view.

The sun served as a rough compass, and by patient

scrutiny on every side he began to get a pretty good idea of the general lie of the island. He was looking almost due south. Behind him, to the north, there seemed to be nothing but trees, and he came to the conclusion that about a half of the island must be forest-land. Ahead of him, and both to right and left, he could catch the glint of moving sunlight on water, and he guessed that the width of the island could hardly be more than a mile. Where the farmhouse was seemed to be almost the only cultivated patch, and it stood on a sort of promontory considerably higher than most of the surrounding land. George judged it to be about a mile and a quarter away, and he longed bitterly for a good pair of glasses. Still, in that bright, clear air he could see well enough, and he kept his eyes glued to it hopefully.

He had not long to wait before he saw signs of activity. Three figures came out of the farmhouse and made their way down the same drive along which he and Verney had run in the darkness not many hours before. George grinned. He could not at that distance identify the figures, but he could see that there were only three of them, and he realized that he held a big initial advantage.

Whoever was in charge of operations at the farmhouse was faced with the difficulty which has always confronted the attacking force from the days of primitive warfare down to the era of aeroplanes and gas. Strategy, on the whole, does not alter much. In medieval times lords of the turbulent marches of Wales were set just the same problem by marauding bandits that George now set the thin-lipped Doctor and his merry crew.

The strong man in his castle must come out to punish or catch his tormentor, and at the same time he dared

not omit to leave an adequate defending force behind for fear the hunted ones give him the slip and capture his base behind his back.

George realized this, and was comforted by it. "Three to search," he thought. "and two to keep the home fires burning. All of them armed probably. Well, three men will have a job to beat these coverts by the look of it"; and, having passed on all this in cautious tones to Verney below him, he settled down to watch the fun.

Sure enough, the three men spread out as soon as they reached the open land lying outside the grounds of the farmhouse, and began to move slowly forward, with some sixty yards between each of them, for all the world like beaters walking through a field of roots.

George laughed. He might be hungry from lack of breakfast, but he knew that it was going to be a hot, thirsty job for three men to search the whole of the island, small though it was, and he felt that, for the moment at any rate, he and Verney had the better part.

Every now and again the searchers disappeared from view in some hollow or behind some ragged copse; but in general the part of the island where they had begun their hunt was bare, and George could see at least one of them most of the time.

He spoke very little to Verney, for fear the sound of human voices should carry far in that clear air, and midway through the morning he lit one of his dwindling store of cigarettes, and smoked it to the last shred of tobacco.

For some time now his hunters had been out of sight, and he thought they must be working in the valley where he and Verney had got a soaking in the burn the

night before. He kept half an eye cocked for their re-emergence into view, and meanwhile gave himself to studying the farmhouse and its immediate surroundings seriously.

About a quarter of a mile to the right of the house was a building, partially obscured from his view by the top of a big fir-tree, which he supposed to be a barn or similar adjunct of a farm. Straight ahead of him was the most prominent physical feature of the island, a sort of rocky hillock rising to a considerable height, and so sharply silhouetted against the skyline, with nothing to be seen beyond but sky and the distant glint of sunlight on water, that he thought it must be part of the cliffs on the island coast.

George looked a long time at that up-jutting of rock. If, as he surmised, it stood on the coast approach to it from the seaward side would probably be difficult, if not impossible, and to landward it certainly dominated the scene.

"If we only had some bacon we could have a good dish of bacon and eggs—if we had some eggs," thought George, meaning that if a man were safely positioned on the top of that desirable vantage-point of rock and armed with a rifle he might make it very uncomfortable for anyone using the farmhouse—if only he had a rifle!

His studies of this tantalizing subject were interrupted by the reappearance of what he had by now mentally christened the "Island Dog Pack." They had breasted the slope of the small valley that had been hiding them, and were now much nearer. George tried to identify them. The Doctor was definitely not there—"toasting his toes at home, studying some of those wall pictures

ODDS ON BLUEFEATHER

of his," George thought—but it was easy enough to pick out Lodder, who at that distance looked twice as big as the men with him. Who those two were George was not sure, but he did not think that the ex-pug was one of them, and he grinned. "Perhaps that gent has got a headache this morning," he thought, with a great deal of satisfaction.

They were almost near enough for him to distinguish their features, and George groaned inwardly when they suspended the hunt for a while and, drawing together in a knot, sat down to enjoy a well-earned midday meal. Any talking was now out of the question, and George dared not ask Verney the time, but from the position of the sun he judged it to be nearer two than one, and his breakfast-less, luncheon-less stomach complainingly verified such a guess.

The three searchers took their time over eating, and their unhurried attitude made George aware of the uncomfortable truth, that, after all, though he might hold the whip-hand temporarily, the all-important factor of time was against him. If he and Verney were kept on the run without food or proper shelter for three or four days they would be in a poor case by the end of it. He set his mouth in a grim line: poor case or not, he meant to hang out till the bitter end.

Presently Lodder and his two helpers got to their feet and, stringing out to their usual distances, began searching again. Almost immediately they disappeared from view among the outlying trees of the dense wood and George had to content himself with listening to the gradually increasing noises of their approach.

Before very long he was rewarded with a perfectly clear view of Lodder, as that angry man worked his way along

a narrow ride slightly to George's right. He came so close that George could easily have hit him with a stone, and, to George's delight, he looked very hot and bad-tempered.

He was working with a will, and it gave George an uncomfortable feeling down his spine to see the savagely thorough way in which the big-shouldered giant went about his job. He was carrying a stout ash stick, with which he thrashed every yard of undergrowth and shrub as he went along; and every few paces or so he stopped beating, and raised his great head to listen. George could see that he had a revolver slung from a belt round his middle, and round his bull neck was a chain carrying a whistle. Mr Lodder evidently did things thoroughly.

"By the time he does find us—if he ever does," thought George, "friend Lodder will be in a really bad temper, and I don't think, somehow, that he'd be very nice to meet under those circumstances." He had an insane temptation, almost overpowering, for a second, to give a gentle whistle when that heavy-jowled red face was cocked in its inquiring attitude.

Beating and listening, beating and listening, Lodder lumbered by on his slow but efficient journey, and the noise of his search began to die away in a *diminuendo* in the wood.

George grinned. "Very systematic!" he thought. He approved of people whose minds worked on a system. Being up against a system gives a hunted man this great advantage, that he has only to time his counter-movements successfully to beat it to a frazzle. George had not the slightest doubt that that trio of thorough and conscientious men would go on through the rest of

the wood in their systematic search as long as the light lasted. He hoped they would. As soon as they were a little distance beyond his tree he started to climb down. Every movement at first was agony after the hours he had spent in a cramped and awkward position, but he soon gained the branch where Verney sat in some reasonable degree of comfort, and apparently perfectly content.

George explained in a whisper what he intended to do, and for fear he lost his way in returning they arranged a signal between them to guide him. Then without further loss of time he went swinging branch by branch, down the rest of the tree, and in a minute or so jumped easily to the ground.

It was heaven to be able to stretch his cramped and aching legs in free movement again, and, doing his best to keep a mental image of as much topography of the island as he had been able to master, he set off at a good pace.

Food was a necessity, and George hoped to come across some fisherman's hut where he could get what he wanted. If it were true that the island was uninhabited save by the Doctor and his company, then George intended to raid the farmhouse while its defence was still weakened by the absence of the searching-party.

Unfortunately for him, his calculation about the behaviour of the searching-party was upset by the introduction of the purely human element into the scheme of things.

Quite unknown to the unsuspecting George, Lodder had not progressed more than four or five hundred yards on his patient beating and searching when he saw some one walking along one of the rough and

almost obliterated paths that crossed the wood at rare intervals

Lodder looked after the disappearing figure without saying a word, but he was pleased. He could make a good guess where Grace Trenner was going at that time of day; and feeling that he had earned a bit of a respite, he abandoned his search, conscientiously marking a tree to show where he had left off, and without giving any notice to either of his companions, who were both hidden from view, turned on his tracks and began to follow the girl

Grace Trenner was the elder daughter of Reuben Trenner, who until a year ago had lived the hard and primitive life of a fisherman in a Cornish village. When news came to the village that Friday Island, some ten miles off the western coast of Cornwall, had been bought by an eccentric, who was going to put its one dilapidated farmhouse in order and live there, the locals were no more than mildly interested. Not a man on the coast who did not know Friday Island as a matter of course, for it formed a valuable guiding-point on the run home, and not one in a hundred who had ever landed there, for the simple reason that there was nothing to land for. The island had the reputation of being as unprofitable and barren a bit of ground as there was to be found anywhere, and your good Cornish fisherman had more useful things to do than go exploring deserted islands. But when the further news came that a caretaker was wanted for the place Reuben Trenner was first among the dozen applicants for the job.

With all the rest of the Cornishmen he listened to the conditions of tenure without giving indication, by sign or sound, as to what he thought of them.

Whoever got the post, they were told, must be prepared to live on the island permanently. He must be married, and his wife must be able to cook. No boat must be kept, and no wireless. The caretaker would be expected to farm what bit of tillable land there was, and to keep the house supplied with vegetables and poultry; and the salary was to be a house, which would be made for him out of a deserted farm cottage, and three pounds a week.

More than half the applicants went no further when they understood that they would not be allowed to keep a boat. Seafaring and fishing were in their blood, and they could not visualize life without it; and of those that persisted Reuben Trenner, with his taciturn wife and two strapping daughters, got the job.

Even in a county famous for a sort of surly independence Trenner had been marked by his habit of keeping to himself. He considered it no hardship to be alone on Friday Island with his family, and, as for the matter of a boat and fishing, he agreed to that at once. He had his own ideas on the subject, which, like a good Cornishman, he kept strictly under his hat.

What with poultry and vegetables, a dozen sheep, and some goats, he fared every bit as well on Friday Island as he had done in his native village, and his Cornish soul gloated over the three whole pounds a week, as regular as clockwork, which he began to amass.

He despised his employers as being 'foreigners'; but, even so, he was bound to admit that they gave surprisingly little trouble. More often than not they were not there; and when they were it merely meant that his wife had to do the cooking for them and his daughters the housework.

Reuben Trenner never bothered to wonder what his womenkind thought about it all. Whether they liked a thing or not did not enter into his consideration of it. He knew that his daughters, especially Grace, the elder, were growing up into very attractive-looking girls, and he supposed that, like all the fisher-folk women he had ever known, they would eventually lose their virtue to some man, and marry him when there was no other way out of it. He was a solitary man by nature; he enjoyed life on Friday Island. It was like being a king in his own domain, and he did not bother to stop to consider what other people might be thinking of it. Certainly he had no idea of what went on in the head of his elder daughter.

Grace Trenner was possessed of that combination of physical qualities which our forefathers called by the fine word 'comely.' She had beauty of feature and colouring, but, more important still, she had a simple, uninstructed dignity and grace which made her more than ordinarily attractive in men's eyes. In the Cornish fishing village where she had lived all her life before coming to the island she had given little sign of realizing that men's heads were turned to watch her as she passed. She was a curiously grave girl who kept her own counsel and thought her own thoughts.

On the island it was her duty every afternoon to feed the Rhode Island Reds, whose pens and runs were in a secluded cup of land some distance from where her father lived. A shed stood there, a ramshackle affair put up by Trenner, primitive enough, but sufficient to house grain, tools, and the like.

As Grace made her way to this she was thinking of the big man at the House, whose eyes had left little doubt

of his feelings in her regard, and it was with dramatic aptness, therefore, that she was suddenly startled by a rich voice calling her, and, swinging round, with her hand on the latch of the shed, she saw Lodder not twenty paces off.

George found it more difficult than he had anticipated to keep his direction once he got on to the ground again, and it was not long before he realized that he had gone astray from his most direct route back to the house. However, he had the sun as a general guide, and as he wanted to explore the island a little first, and see if it would not yield some sort of sanctuary, he was not much troubled about going out of his way.

He lost ten minutes floundering through a marsh which he came across unexpectedly, and when he gained the far side of it, wet up to the knees, and scrambled up a bit of bank topped by some scrubby trees, he saw a sight that made his mouth water.

The ground fell away gently in a saucer-like depression from where he stood, and in the centre of the flat space was what looked to George like the most marvellous poultry-farm he had ever dreamed about. Actually there were some two hundred Rhode Island Reds in half a dozen runs, and near by a rough hut. But George's vision was coloured by the empty state of his stomach; and while the gastric juices literally flowed into his mouth the first thought that jumped into his head was "Gosh, dinner!"

He was within a few paces of the first pen when something pulled him up short and jerked his head in the air. He had heard a man's low laugh come from the wooden hut near by, and almost instantly a woman's

voice rang out sharp and clear, "For God's sake, leave me alone!"

That decided it for George. For the moment he shelved thoughts of dinner, and, walking over to the wooden hut, he pushed the door open with his foot.

He hardly knew what it was he expected to see but certainly it was not Lodder. Yet Lodder's unmistakable back was the first thing that met his eye, and beyond it, over the massive shoulder, the terrified face of a girl.

Lodder had pushed Grace against the wall of the hut, and was holding her arms high above her so that he was able to kiss her at will. The last thing in the world that he expected was to be interrupted in his little game, but something in the girl's eye made him turn his head, and what he saw astonished him.

For a moment George and Lodder stared at each other without speaking. Then the big man dropped the girl's arms and forgot her. "Zo," he said, with a sort of amused expectancy in his voice, "the young man who escapes, *hein?*" And at that instant, before another half-syllable could come out of that full and sagging mouth, George acted. He knew that Lodder was armed, and he had not the slightest doubt that the big man would shoot him down like a dog if he got a chance. George had no intention of ending his days by being blown to bits at the end of a revolver in the middle of an uninhabited island, so without a word of warning he sailed straight into things.

His attack was launched so suddenly and so fiercely that Lodder was overwhelmed. He received a left and right in his face which made him grunt with pain before he knew where he was, and he was conscious of

nothing but a dancing devil in front of him who rained in blows from every possible angle.

George had no time to look at the girl, but he was aware that she slid from the hut as silently and quickly as a wild thing and disappeared from the scene. He was glad. He meant to give bad-tempered Lodder a dose of medicine, and he wanted room to do it in.

George had been drugged and imprisoned, and for almost twenty-four hours had been without food, and the concentrated venom engendered by all these sufferings and indignities boiled up in him now that Fate gave him a chance to work it off on some one.

Lodder was not a fool with his fists, and he was a man of colossal strength, but for the first three minutes George was inspired, and it was pure luck that the big man did not collect one on the vital point of the chin which would have put him out completely.

After sustaining the first terrific onslaught he gained his senses a little, and made a desperate attempt to snatch at the whistle that hung from his neck and blow it.

George saw what he was after, and with a violent tug broke the chain and threw it and its whistle into a corner of the hut.

"Fight by yourself!" he cried. "God knows, you're big enough!" and, dodging one of Lodder's windmill-like but totally unscientific blows, he danced neatly in on his toes and landed a wickedly exact punch on the big man's nose. Blood simply spurted out, as though he had turned on a fountain.

"Tapped his claret," George thought, enjoying himself hugely. "Now for some fun."

The pain and the grin on George's face drove Lodder

suddenly mad. He forgot he had a revolver—which so far he had had no chance to draw—forgot that his opponent was fighting with his fists only, forgot everything except the dancing, dodging, triumphant face before him. Lodder saw red. Murder was in his heart and in his twisted, cruel brain. Bending down, he picked up a rough wooden stool that stood in the hut and began to lash out madly with it all round him.

If the man had not been so uncontrollably wild he must have bashed George's brains out in those first few seconds, for he had terrific strength, and one of his blows, if it had landed, would have felled any living thing; but he was in such a berserk rage that he was fighting blindly, and this fact alone saved George.

"You damned cad," George shouted, "fight fair!" but he knew he might as well have shouted at an orang-utan, and, since he had not the least desire to be laid out and left to Lodder's tender mercies, he turned tail and ran.

He ran in earnest, because he realized that nothing less than a murderer was after him, and Lodder burst out of the hut not twenty yards behind, still ludicrously brandishing the stool. The Rhode Island Reds squawked and fluttered as this commotion tore past, and in the midst of his hurry George found time to reflect that dinner was as far off as ever.

He kept no sense of direction in his running, heading simply where the going looked easiest—and fifty times in as many yards he cursed the ill-fitting shoes he was wearing. But, bad shoes and all, he was drawing away from Lodder, who was too clumsily built for speed.

"If I can keep this up for ten minutes," thought

George. "I shall shake him off," and almost simultaneously his heart gave him warning that he would not be able to keep it up for ten minutes, perhaps not for five. He had had no food for almost a whole day, and had followed a night in the open with hours of painfully cramped sitting. On top of all this the wild five minutes in the hut now began to tell their tale, and heart and lungs, fit though they were, gave warning signs of distress.

George glanced over his shoulder. The rough track he was following had taken a turn and dipped slightly, and was now going between coarse blackberry-bushes on either side. At the moment Lodder was not in sight. George was beginning to feel beat: he knew he could not last the pace much farther, and yet he hesitated to turn aside with Lodder so close on his heels.

"If he catches up with me," he thought grimly, "I'm done for." His heart was pounding like a pump, and his breath came hard and sharp. He was the hunted thing, and it is little fun being hunted when muscle, nerve, and sinews have done all they can do and yet it is not enough.

He threw one more glance over his shoulder. Lodder had not yet turned the bend in the track, but George knew that at any instant he would. As he turned his head to the front again his eyes caught something low down in the bushes on his left.

It was the dark head of the girl he had seen in the hut. Without saying a word she beckoned to him, and, thinking that any hazard was better than the one he was in, he swerved to the left and ran to her among the bushes.

Without warning he crashed down some four feet into

UP A TREE

a hidden pit, and the fall knocked all the remaining wind and most of the wits out of him, but he had the sense to lie still and soundless, smothering his laboured breathing as best he might, while not ten feet away Lodder lumbered by, still in pursuit, an angry and a dangerous man.

CHAPTER XIV

A WOMAN TO THE RESCUE

WHEN Lodder was safely out of earshot the girl lifted the cautionary hand she had laid on George's mouth and asked in a whisper, "Are you hurt?"

George grinned leebly, wits and wind were coming back to him. His right ankle felt as though a pair of red-hot pincers was gripping it, but he did not think it was more than bruised

"Knocked my ankle about a bit," he answered, "but I don't think it's serious. You chipped in just in time."

The girl nodded with a ghost of a smile. "You are hiding from them up at the house?" she asked.

George wondered how much she knew, and how much it was safe to say. He concluded, however, that he was not in a position to play his hand with much *finesse* at the moment.

"More or less," he agreed.

"And where are you going to hide?"

"The Lord knows, and I can't say I'm worrying much about that at the moment. What I want above anything else is a square meal."

"You are hungry?"

"Hungry?" George swore fervently. "I could eat a horse."

The girl laughed almost noiselessly, and got to her feet. "Come with me!" she said, and, forcing her way through the bushes, she scrambled out of the pit. George followed with alacrity, and he was much relieved to

find that although his injured ankle was extremely painful it did not prevent his walking at a reasonable pace.

As they went along he did his best to extract some information from the girl, but she kept hurrying ahead, as though impatient of his retarded gait, and answered, when she answered at all, as shortly as possible. He succeeded, however, in learning the one salient fact that she and her family were the only people on the island besides the inhabitants of the farmhouse.

She led him quickly and surely through a succession of scrubby coppices and over a pathless sort of heath, until eventually they struck a well-worn path, and the ground on either hand began to show signs of cultivation. Grace Trenner knew that there was no time to spare. Her mother and sister were at the house, engaged in household duties—and Trenner had been called away early, with some tale of a man in hiding, to help in the search. She hoped, and thought, that he would not be back for a full hour yet, but even so fear of her father made her hurry George along as much as possible.

Presently their path broadened into something like a farm road, and they came upon the steading. It was a low, ramshackle affair, and it looked lonely enough in all conscience in its utter isolation. From the sound of the sea, which had suddenly become more prominent again, George judged that they must be near the coast.

If her father had returned he would have been busy in the outsheds—and the girl, seeing no sign of him there, led the way with assurance into the kitchen.

Here a wood fire burned in the old-fashioned grate, and George sat down before it thankfully, what time the girl, leaving the room, busied herself in getting food.

She was back in a couple of minutes with a freshly

baked loaf and a great mound of cheese, and without any preliminaries at all George fell on this noble fare in earnest. He ate ravenously, and stopped only to gulp down mouthfuls of clear cold water which the girl had drawn for him from the well.

Grace Trenner sat and watched him, but George heeded her scrutiny not a bit. He would be prepared to answer and ask any number of questions in about ten minutes' time, when the pressing necessities of the moment had been seen to. But Fate knits up the pattern with tragic intent, and George never got those precious ten minutes undisturbed. He had been eating for barely half as long when a footstep on the paving that ran round the house made him look up. The girl had heard it too, and one glance at her was enough to show that she was scared.

"My father," she began in an urgent whisper—"if he——" Then a shadow fell across the window, and Reuben Trenner looked into the room.

He stared in for a full ten seconds, and then, stumping round to the door, kicked it open and entered. A jerk of his dark head sent Grace silently out of the room. George did not feel altogether at ease, but wild horses would have had a job to drag him away from his bread-and-cheese at that moment.

"Sorry to intrude," he said cheerfully, "but I happened to do the young lady—your daughter, I believe—a bit of a service, and she very kindly asked me in for some thing to eat"—here he helped himself to about half a pound more cheese—"and I must say I'm appreciating it."

Trenner nodded. "You seem to be rightly sharp set," he commented.

A WOMAN TO THE RESCUE

Without interrupting his knife-and-fork play for a second George took covert stock of his involuntary host, and he had to admit to himself that he did not much like what he saw. Trenner was a short, stocky man, darker than an Englishman should be, with two narrow eyes set close together in a mean face. Those narrow eyes summed up George carefully. Trenner had heard that morning of George's escape from the house. Indeed, he had spent all the day since eight o'clock searching the part of the island seaward of the farmhouse for the very man who now sat calmly eating in his own kitchen.

Trenner knew that the Doctor, for some reason, was fanatically anxious to get hold of the escaped man, and he had every intention of promoting himself in his employer's regard by assisting him to achieve his object. The right or wrong of the case mattered nothing to Reuben Trenner, all he thought of was his three pounds a week. He had in his hand a heavy ash stick which he was careful not to relinquish.

Without seeming to George had made a pretty close scrutiny of the man standing over him, and, since at the moment what he wanted above all else was a respite, he decided that a little bluff would not be out of place.

"'Fraid I've got to keep sitting down,' he said. "I twisted my ankle rather badly."

Trenner seemed interested. "Do you mean you can't walk?" he asked.

"Scarcely," George lied. "I'm afraid it's a sprain. I could only just hobble along here."

Reuben Trenner smiled, after his twisted fashion. No need to crack a lame duck over the head, better not to do anything to scare it away before the fowler arrives.

"Sit down here," he said, "and eat your fill. Nobody will disturb you"; and with a nod which was meant to be reassuring he went out of the room.

"I don't think I like that bird altogether," thought George. "Wonder what he's up to?" and, feeling sure that such provision would not come amiss, he cut into two halves what was left of the loaf and pocketed it together with some cheese.

Outside Trenner was facing his daughter. No love had ever existed between them. She was one of his woman-kind, and he had little more regard for her, except as a useful domestic adjunct, than he had for his sheep or his goats.

"Go up to the house quickly," he said in low tones "and tell Mr Lodder——"

"I'll tell Mr Lodder nothing," the girl answered fiercely.

Her father let that pass for the moment. He had a shrewd idea how the land lay in that direction, and if his upstart of a girl had any notion of letting foolish squeamishness stand in the way of keeping in with their employer he would know how to deal with it. Meanwhile there was a more urgent matter.

"Tell the Doctor himself, then," he amended. "that one of the men he wants is here, with a sprained ankle. Let them send a couple down to fetch him, and I will keep him till they come.

Grace hesitated. She knew nothing of the quarrel between the man eating in the kitchen and the queer crew up at the house—but of the two she knew already which she preferred.

"Get on," her father ordered, "and hurry! I shan't be able to keep this hungry young fool here for ever."

Like her mother and sister, Grace Trenner had good cause to fear her father. Her life had been one of obedience to him. She obeyed him now. With as near a sneer as she dared give, she turned angrily away and, pulling her shawl over her head, slipped out of the side-door.

Reuben Trenner smiled. He foresaw kudos and possibly a little immediate profit coming to him out of this lucky affair. Both as fisherman and farmer he had found the times on which fortune presented him with a nice fat plum on a plate exceedingly rare. He turned to go back to the kitchen to keep a wary eye on things. Had he been five seconds earlier it would have been better for him.

Five seconds before Trenner came back into the room George was startled from the still absorbing task of eating by a light finger-nail tap on the window-pane. He looked up to see the girl, with a shawl wrapped round her head peering in. Twice she pointed to the door of the room and shook her head, evidently in some sort of warning, but before George could make out what it was all about she had glided out of sight, and the door-handle was turning.

George raised his eyes innocently as his host entered, and in reply to a query said that he was getting on nicely, thank you, but inwardly he was thinking, "I've got to keep an eye on this bird."

It did not take much figuring out to come to the conclusion that if Trenner were the only person on the island besides those at the house it was odds on his being subservient to them in some sort of capacity. From the moment that he realized that George began to be uncomfortable Trenner's kitchen lost its first friendliness.

and began to feel like a prison, and every second that passed increased his determination to get out of it as soon as possible

A few sentences of rather slow-going conversation passed between them, and George felt all the time that the Cornishman was trying to allay any suspicions until the moment suited him to show his hand

"Seems as though you've finished your bread," Trenner said "Perhaps you'd be liking some more?"

"Just what I should like!" George cried with enthusiasm, though by now he had eaten his fill, and he added, "It's a damned nuisance about this ankle. I doubt if I can walk on it at all now"

"Sit you still," Trenner answered, "and I'll bring the bread" He moved towards the door in his ungainly fashion, smiling. A loaf of bread was little enough to spend in the way of bait, he thought. He might not have been so well pleased could he have seen that the moment he left the room George was out of his seat and across to the door like a panther.

The last forty-eight hours had taught him something about the value of attack in all forms of emergency, and he had made up his mind that it was not pure goodness of heart that sent dark Trenner bread-hunting for him. Very, very gently he turned the handle and opened the door. He found himself looking across a narrow hall. On the other side of it, immediately opposite him, stood the doorway leading to the cellar.

Reuben Trenner stood there, for the top of the cellar steps was evidently used as a larder. The man had his back to George, and was busy with a loaf on one of the shelves.

George made his decision in a flash. He took two

strides across the hall, put his right hand in the middle of Trenner's back, and pushed hard. The man fell forward against the shelves with a startled oath, and instantly George slammed the door on him and turned the key.

The silence was immediately shattered by a shower of kicks on the door and by the violent rattling of its handle. George took no more notice of these than he did of the volley of foul abuse that came pouring out on him. He laughed in high glee, and, turning, would have been out of the house in two seconds, but that, as he turned, something caught his eye.

There was an antique barometer in the hall. By the side of it hung two crossed riding-whips, and above these, resting on the antlers of a stag's head, was something that made George gasp. It was an old-fashioned rifle, with a full cartridge-belt hanging by it. George had them both down in an instant. The overwhelming nature of this find made him completely forget the *crescendo* of curses turning the air blue not many feet from his head. The rifle was clean, and it looked in good order, and the loaded cartridge-belt seemed to prove that it was no mere show piece. Slinging the cartridge-belt over his shoulder, and with more hope in his heart than he had had all day, George ran out into the open.

It was late afternoon, and he knew that there could not be a great deal of daylight left. He was in a desperate hurry to get back to Verney, but he had lost all sense of direction, and had not the vaguest idea where their tree was. The best he could do was to keep the sun on his left and so head north, for he knew that the wooded part of the island where they had been hiding was its northern half. He was soon out of range of the

cultivated part round Trenner's steading, and the going got more and more difficult. Once he unexpectedly emerged on to the coastline, and actually saw a tramp steamer ploughing its steady way along some five or six miles out. He lost no time in flinging down the rifle and cartridge-belt and whipping off his coat, which he waved vigorously, but without the slightest success; and before long he realized the hopelessness of it, and was hurrying on again.

He was relieved to find that he was beginning to enter a more thickly wooded part of the island, and he was just thinking that he must be getting somewhere near his goal when a loud, clear voice not fifty yards away almost made his heart stop.

George had spent many hard hours stalking in Scotland, and from a wise and dour old gillie he had learned the supreme value of stillness in the wild. The lesson stood him in good stead now. The second that he heard the voice he 'froze,' and remained absolutely motionless, without attempting to take cover. He was by the side of a scrubby oak, and not fifty yards away from him three men crossed the open glade and for half a minute walked in full view of him.

For all his perilous position George could not help a grin of satisfaction. They were the three searchers he had seen from the tree, Lodder, Carl, and Bauer, and a very tired and disconsolate trio they looked. They were searching no longer, and were evidently on the way back to the house. Lodder was talking loudly, and seemed to be rating the other two, who were sullenly silent. With his heart racing a little George watched them till they disappeared from sight among the trees once more.

Twice his hand tightened on the rifle, but he wisely refrained from using it. It was as yet an untried weapon, and here he had no position of advantage. He meant to do a good deal more with that rifle, if the gods willed, than take a pot-shot at a man among the trees.

When the three men had long since passed out of hearing he relaxed his tension, and, laughing to himself, set off through the trees the way that they had come.

It was rapidly getting towards twilight, and he was scared that he would not find Verney before dark, but after walking for a quarter of an hour he suddenly came upon the fringe of a dense clump of Scotch firs. He thought it was on the other side of these that the oak-tree stood, and when he was in the middle of the firs, and well hidden by them, he halted and, moistening his lips, started to whistle the opening lines of *John Peel*.

This was the prearranged signal between himself and Verney, and he was inexpressibly relieved to hear it answered almost immediately. The answering whistle came from his left front, and he set off at once towards it. In a few minutes he came to the edge of the closely planted firs, and saw Verney standing at the foot of the big oak-tree.

The two men instinctively shook hands, and George at once produced the bread-and-cheese from his pocket, about half of which he gave to Verney, reserving the rest for the next day.

While Verney, squatting on the ground, wolfed his food as only a man who has gone hungry for twenty-four hours can wolf it, George recounted in low tones what had happened.

ODDS ON BLUEFEATHER

He kept a cautious eye and ear for any signs of danger, but he did not expect any. He had little doubt that the gang from the house had gone back there for the night, and would renew activities on an intensified scale in the morning. And he meant to have a surprise ready for them when the sun rose.

CHAPTER XV

GOOD DEFENCE

FOR a full hour after dawn broke George patiently studied every detail of their new position, while Verney slept quietly on the hard ground by his side.

The most critical investigation showed that they had stumbled on a unique spot. The Rock of Good Defence, as George mentally christened it, was as surely meant to dominate its surroundings as the Tower of London was built to dominate the City. Good Defence consisted of a conical hump of ground, through whose thin, inadequate turf the hard primeval rock jutted everywhere. To the south the cliff fell away beneath them a sheer sixty feet, so that had they moved backwards three yards they would have been over the edge.

George inspected this seaward aspect searchingly. He decided that it would be a difficult, but by no means an impossible, climb for a man to make his way up from the narrow strip of sand that lay at the foot of the cliff. On the other hand, a man could achieve the climb but slowly, and while he was doing it he would be at the mercy of anyone looking down on him. With such an eventuality in view one of George's first defensive measures was to accumulate a considerable heap of stones and rocks of all description that lay about on the grass all round.

Next he surveyed what lay in front of him. This was as reassuring as the seaward view, for on all sides the ground fell away in a gentle, steady slope, as bare as the

back of his hand, and offering no cover whatsoever until some three hundred yards away, as he judged, stood the house.

He looked at the house for some time, and almost longingly, for he was anxious for the fun to start.

It lay quiet and unsuspecting in the strengthening daylight. A bare three hundred yards is not far for a pair of good eyes, and George could see details of the house and its surrounding grounds as clearly as he wished.

The main building was L-shaped, and of its two limbs the longer one was three storeys in height, the shorter two. He could see the sloping roof down which he and Verney had made their escape two nights before, and, best of all, he commanded a perfect view of what was evidently the back door in the extremity of the shorter leg of the building.

In the yard outside this back door, and perhaps a dozen paces from the house, stood a pump. George grinned when he saw it: he fancied he was going to have a little fun with that pump before the day was much older.

To the side of the house were a few evergreen bushes standing in what had been at one time the garden but which was now so sadly neglected as hardly to deserve the name, and beyond these, to the east of them, a wide, flat expanse of perfectly bare grass leading up to a shed.

George recognized this as the building which he had caught sight of from his vantage-point in the tree, and he now realized that it was the hangar for housing the aeroplane.

All these dispositions of ground and buildings he went over time and time again, and the more he saw of them the more commanding he felt his own position to be. No

one could enter or leave either house or hangar without coming directly and immediately under fire, at easy range, from him. George thanked his stars for deer-stalking in Scotland, which had taught him to be a patient and an exceedingly useful shot.

He next examined Trenner's rifle. In the modern world, when the shape and style of anything is likely to change overnight, an expert might have pronounced it old-fashioned, but it was evidently well made, and it looked serviceable. The barrel was clean, and the breech well oiled. George could not discover the name of its maker, but something squat and ungainly about it made him think it was of German origin, and he liked it none the less for that. He knew that when he put his mind to it Brother Boche made as good a rifle as there was to be had in the whole wide world.

He would dearly have loved to try a practice shot, but in his belt were fifteen, and only fifteen, cartridges. He dared not waste one of them, knowing full well that they were going to be more precious to him than diamonds ever were.

When his inspection and all his preparations were complete he settled himself down as comfortably as he could, facing the house, laid the rifle by his side, and waited.

Presently Verney woke up, refreshed by his rest, and they talked together a little in low tones. There was a shallow depression in the top of their conical bump of rock, and George made Verney find a resting-place in it, being determined to take as much advantage of what little cover the place offered as he could.

They had not long settled down in their respective positions when across the clear, crisp morning air came

bucket and hurry into the house before George could have another pot at him.

George was delighted. The rifle had a vicious kick, and the trigger was uncomfortably stiff in pulling, but he had proved his weapon, and his confidence went up 100 per cent.

"First trick to us!" he said gleefully to Verney. "The next move's up to them."

Nothing happened for more than an hour, except that a plume of smoke began to drift lazily out of one of the old-fashioned chimneys, and George rightly concluded that, like a sensible man, the Doctor was having his breakfast in peace, and holding a council of war over it.

Both when deer-stalking and in the ring George had learned the supreme value of putting yourself in your opponent's place and trying to imagine what you would do in 'his case. He wondered, if the positions were reversed and he were inside the house, what his next move would be. He had the Doctor's word for it that the total strength against him was six men including Trenner. These six he reckoned to be the Doctor himself ("I wish I could get a pot at *him*," George thought), Lodder, the ex-pug, the two men who had been searching with Lodder on the previous day, and friend Trenner. Of these, in all probability, five were in the house, and Trenner was away on his own steading, Trenner would have heard the shot, and would soon be coming along to see what was happening. George knew that they had revolvers in the house, and they might have a rifle or two, though he did not think this likely; and in any case if they had he would doubtless soon know about it. Supposing that they had nothing that would carry farther than a revolver, the most obvious course of action was to make a

sudden *sortie* from the house in force, spread out into distended order, and attempt to rush him.

He lay in wait expecting this to happen at any minute, and he did not doubt that he could give a very good account of himself if it did. A party of attackers from the house had three hundred yards to cross without cover of any sort, and he did not think he would have any difficulty in dropping three of them before they got near enough to be dangerous. If the Doctor cared to take the risk George would welcome it: but apparently the Doctor did not care to, for an hour passed without anything happening, and then it was not what George had expected. He was keeping such a wary eye on the back door that he did not notice a certain activity on the roof until Verney called his attention to it. He brought his rifle to his shoulder instantly, but what was going on was masked by a chimney-stack, and although some one was undoubtedly there—one of yesterday's searchers, he thought—he dare not waste one of his precious cartridges.

It was Verney who guessed what they were up to.

"It looks as though some one's signalling," he said, and George realized at once that Trenner must be on his way to the house, and that they were signalling to him to keep out of the danger zone. He kept a sharp look-out towards the trees beyond the aeroplane hangar in the direction in which he knew Trenner's steading to be, but no one emerged into the open and he supposed that the warning signal had been seen and understood.

Verney was at his side, and five minutes had gone by before George realized what danger they were in.

"Get back and look over the cliff," he cried urgently to Verney, "and see if anyone is coming up that way."

Verney had actually opened his mouth to say that the cliff-side was safe when something changed the words on his lips. "There's some one—a man—just come in sight," he said quietly. "He's dodged back now into a cave of sorts."

George grinned. "Don't let him see you!" he counselled in the same cautious undertone. "Come back here and keep an eye on the house. We'll give the rock-climbing merchant a bit of rope, and see what happens. He can't exactly gallop up that cliff face"

It was hard work to master his curiosity and refrain from peeping over the edge, but he didn't want to scare the quarry out of range too soon, and he bided his time patiently.

He had a shrewd idea that there would be a frontal attack as well, and he told Verney to keep a close watch on the house, and tell him if anything happened. When five minutes had gone by since they first sighted the man at the bottom of the cliff George pulled himself to the edge on his stomach, and peered cautiously over.

Sure enough Trenner was making the difficult ascent. He had come up about twenty feet, George judged, and was climbing as only a Cornish fisherman can climb rocks, finding footholds and grips where a seagull would hesitate to perch. He had a stick slung round his neck, but as far as George could see he was not armed in any other way. After every few movements he stopped and looked searchingly above him. Reuben Trenner did not seem to relish his job much, and George did not wonder.

As he was watching the climbing man some forty feet below Verney suddenly said excitedly, "There's some one coming out—two of them!"

This was what George expected, and he acted at once,

but without losing his head. From his accumulated pile of stones he selected one as big as his fist, and, choosing a moment when Trenner's dark face was upturned to catch any hint of danger above him, he took careful aim and flung the stone downward with all his strength. The gods were on the side of the beleaguered men that day, and the stone went straight home to its mark. It caught Reuben Trenner full on his mouth, and with something between a cry and a groan he flung up his arms and dropped to the sand twenty feet below. Instantly George picked up his rifle, sighted it coolly at the prostrate figure and fired. He saw the man give a spasmodic twitch, as though he were a marionette on a jerked wire, and he waited no more. Like a flash, he turned round, reloading in the act, and looked over the other side of the rock. Two men had run out of the house, and were both lying flat on the ground, taking what cover they could, some thirty yards apart, and about two hundred from the rock. They were Lodder and the ex-pug, and they were evidently waiting the moment when Trenner should appear over the cliff-top to complete their rush.

The single shot was bad news to them: it meant that Trenner had been spotted. On the other hand, they did not know that he had been hit, and after lying there prone for some thirty seconds Lodder evidently made up his mind to risk it. With a shout to his companion he suddenly got to his feet and began running towards the rock on a zigzag course. The ex-pug was up too, and, disdaining any zigzagging, was coming straight on at a pace a good deal better than Lodder's.

George settled himself comfortably, and brought his rifle up to his cheek. His heart was thumping a bit, but his hands were steady enough. He knew that if this

attack succeeded it was the end of all things both for himself and Verney; and if only he could beat it off their ascendancy, both moral and actual, would be increased enormously. He waited till the running figures were fifty yards nearer.

"For God's sake, can't you see them?" Verney suddenly screamed, and George hardly heard him. His whole attention, his whole being was focused on those two small figures, one zigzagging in a ludicrous way, the other coming straight towards him.

When another five seconds had passed he had made up his mind. He decided on the ex-pug, because his straight running made him an easier target, and because he was a good deal faster than Lodder.

George brought his sights into line, took a deep breath and held it, prayed to whatever Providence looks after men fighting against odds, and fired.

Both men fell to the ground—but whereas Lodder lay still at once the man he had aimed at rolled over twice and clawed at the air in a horrible way with one hand before he became motionless.

"Got him!" George said in a grim whisper. He reloaded at once, and waited. He knew well enough that the ex-pug was done for; there is a sort of instinct which tells the marksman when he has scored a bull. So he concentrated on Lodder, but he would not fire. A man, even a big man, lying on the ground makes a poor target, and George dared not waste any cartridges.

Lodder was scared. Any man lying in an open field armed with a revolver, and with some hundred and fifty yards to cross before he can come to grips with a crack shot has a right to be scared. The big man called twice to the ex-pug, and then, getting no answer, he

suddenly jumped to his feet and bolted back to the house as fast as his legs would take him.

Twice George fired, and each time he had the mortification of seeing a spurt of dust kick up just behind the running man. He had not time for a third shot, even if he had cared to risk wasting it, before Lodder catapulted through the back door of the house and slammed it behind him.

Instantly George leaped to the cliff edge and looked over. He could see nobody. Trenner was certainly not climbing again, and just as certainly he was no longer lying on the sand. But a wide mark on the surface of the sand told its own tale. While George was busy dealing with a frontal attack Trenner must have dragged himself out of sight.

George went back to his vantage-point overlooking the house, put down his trusty rifle, and lit a cigarette. He felt he had earned it. Now they had only five men against them, and one of those was wounded. Moreover, he had proved to his attackers and himself the strength of his position. He felt a little reaction from the excitement of the last ten minutes.

'By gad,' he said suddenly, 'I could do with a drink!' and instantly he regretted the words. He had named, and by naming had somehow given a greater degree of actuality to, their greatest enemy.

Verney was already suffering from thirst. He had been more than twenty-four hours without water, and was badly in need of it, but what he had learned in Tibet had taught him a stoicism in matters of the body which enabled him to endure a great deal. George, more lucky, had drunk little more than twelve hours before in Trenner's house and already he found himself thinking

longingly of that glass of crystal-clear, marble-cold water. He checked himself sharply, realizing that that was one way he must not let his thoughts go

Verney suddenly broke the train of his ideas by saying bitterly, "It seems that men must be killed to bring peace to the world"

George glanced up quickly. Verney was in a squatting position, his chin resting on his knees, staring out to sea. George had no doubt at all that Paul Verney was a great man, great in his conceptions and in his personality, but, like any other man-in-the-street Englishman, George's respect for great men was tinged with a taint of doubt. Great men are liable to be impractical.

"You're right!" he said crisply. "We're going to have our work cut out to get you off this island and back to London in time for the Peace Pact, but, by God, we're going to do it!"

But inwardly he found it hard to echo the conviction of his words. If he had been able to fly an aeroplane he might have tried to rush the hangar and escape that way, but he knew no more about flying than he did of Assyrian mythology, and how he was to get himself and Verney off the island remained a mystery.

He kept a sharp look-out for passing vessels. Three were seen during the morning, but the most vigorous waving of coats produced no result whatsoever.

George realized that he must concentrate on the immediate problem of beating off the attacks of the Doctor's infuriated gang, and with characteristic common sense he set about taking stock of their position.

He still had ten cartridges left, and he was fairly happy on that score. Food was a much more serious problem. He had in his pockets a few scraps of bread-

and-cheese, which he carefully wrapped up in a handkerchief and buried under a stone out of the glare of the sun. Of water they had none, nor any prospect of getting any. In his pocket he had five precious cigarettes Verney had none, but he was happy without smoking; and between them they could only muster one box of matches.

It was not a very reassuring survey; but he was cheered when he thought of the advantage he held over his opponents. To dislodge him they must attack and their attacks must be made without cover. With his rifle by his side he settled himself down to await their next move.

He inaugurated a schedule whereby he and Verney watched in turns, two hours on duty and two hours' rest. At midday he would not issue any of their meagre bread-and-cheese, though Verney asked for it, and he himself was ravenously hungry. Although it was March the sun was quite hot in the early afternoon, and there was no cover from it on that high, exposed rock. In spite of his resolutions George found himself thinking constantly of foaming glasses of divinely iced soda-water; and as some sort of help he put a little round stone into his mouth and sucked away at it.

At four o'clock there was the unmistakable sound of the back door of the house being opened again.

George was not watching, but he was only pretending to sleep. He had been visualizing cold green water dripping slowly over the stone edge of a lovely fountain, and the vision seemed much more agreeable to him than any sleep. He heard the door and was in his place, rifle in hand, in an instant, almost before Verney could give his word of warning.

He expected another *sortie*, and his heart raced a little in anticipation of some crowded minutes. But no one came out of the house. Instead, a walking-stick was stuck out with a white handkerchief tied to it, and waved slowly to and fro.

George lowered his rifle a little uncertainly, but he did not put it down altogether. For a wild half-moment he thought that they might be surrendering, and he wondered what on earth would be his procedure if they did.

He gave a loud "Coo-ee" as a sort of reassurance that he had seen the white flag and would respect it, and immediately a group of three men came out of the house. They were the three he had seen searching the day before. Bauer came first, carrying the improvised flag of truce, then Lodder, and after him Carl, with two spades.

They made their way across the bare ground to where the ex-pug lay twisted in the indecent acrobatics of sudden death. Bauer stuck the walking-stick, with its fluttering handkerchief attached, into the ground near by, and Lodder knelt down by the fallen man, evidently to make sure that what they suspected was true.

A few seconds' investigation showed that it was, and Bauer and Carl, slipping off their jackets, fell to work with the spades.

It was a grim little scene on that lonely, windswept island, and George watched it with curiously mingled feelings. He wondered why the Doctor was not there, and then, remembering what that cold-blooded individual had said about Graham Rivers' death, wondered no longer. Apparently the Doctor had little enough regard for friend or enemy once they ceased to be in a position to affect him personally.

The ground was hard, and it took the two men some time to dig sufficiently deep: but at length it was done, and the last spadeful of loose earth was shovelled back into place.

Carl and Bauer put on their coats once more, shouldered the shovels, the walking-stick with its flag was picked up, and the whole party made their way back to the house. The door shut to again, and the armistice was over.

The remaining light of the afternoon went rapidly, and as dusk drew on George suspended all rest, and both he and Verney watched, straining their eyes through the twilight for any signs from the house.

Luckily the moon was at the full, and it was soon as light as they could wish.

The House by the Sea showed no activity. Since Lodder had hurtled into it at express speed that morning it had given no sign of life all day, save for the interlude of the burial and for its smoking chimney. It seemed now to be settled down for the night, and George did not think there would be any immediate attack.

Towards eight o'clock he divided the remaining bread-and-cheese into two equal parts, which meant something less than an ordinary slice of bread and about an ounce of cheese each. He forced himself to eat his ration slowly, chewing each mouthful long and deliberately. He found the act of swallowing hard and painful, and his mouth was dry and parched afterwards.

After eating Verney knelt for a little while in prayer, and then went to sleep. The usual arrangement about watching and resting was agreed upon for the night and George volunteered for the first two hours on duty. He allowed himself half a cigarette, and as he puffed

at it slowly, sitting there in the moonlight, he did not feel very happy.

The House by the Sea looked sinister in its utter stillness. George would have been a deal happier had the whole lot of them come rushing out in a glorious and deciding scrap.

The night air was blowing cold. He shivered a little. "You're playing for time, you beggars," he muttered grimly, "and I'm afraid time has got us by the short hairs."

of a scagull sounded eerily in that lost world of whiteness. For the tenth time George was tautened into extra intentness. He could have sworn that out in the baffling whiteness before him he had heard some sound of movement.

Without more warning than a word of grumbling about cramp Verney suddenly rose to his full height and stretched himself. "For God's sake, keep down!" George said irritably, and the words were blown to nothingness by the shattering report of a revolver-shot that blew all that eerie silence sky-high, and echoed and re-echoed from the cliffs along the coast.

The next two minutes were the most crowded George had ever spent in his life. The first thing he was aware of was a white-hot line of pain across his right cheek. The revolver bullet had missed Verney's knee by about six inches, and had sent an ugly splinter flying from a piece of rock.

Verney needed no telling to get down now, he dropped like a stone; and before the echoes of the shot had died away a form suddenly materialized out of the woolly whiteness in front of them and flung itself up the last slopes of Good Defence into their very midst.

George had no time to aim and fire. Instinctively he brought his rifle round in a semicircle, and even as he swung it he was blown almost senseless by a second revolver-shot fired not five inches from his face. The bullet went to one side, and his face was scorched and blackened by the explosion; but he never loosened his grip on the trusty rifle, and, putting all he could into the blow, he brought the butt down with sickening force on to the shadowy figure in front of him. The man, whoever he was, went down without a sound—and, breathless

and bewildered, George dropped to one knee and peered desperately into the mist.

He knew there must be more than one attacker, and he cursed the mist, and cursed it again, for robbing him of his sight. By one of the freaks which sea fogs play a sudden swirl of wind made a lane through the whiteness, which for a moment was comparatively clear, and in this lane some thirty feet away George saw for a second the shadowy outline of a man. He steadied himself, brought the rifle up to his cheek, took deliberate aim, and fired. An immediate cry of pain brought a grin of satisfaction to his face, and in the heat of the moment he foolishly reloaded and fired again. It was a stupid waste of a shot, for the figure had been swirled up instantly in the mist again.

George loaded again and knelt, straining his eyes into the mist. He passed a bad ten minutes expecting some fresh danger to loom up out of the fog at any second, but nothing happened, and he gradually came to the conclusion that, for the time being at any rate, the attack was beaten off.

It was the lucky first shot that settled the matter. Lodder and his two subordinates, Carl and Bauer, had set out from the house under cover of the clammy fog. They kept together for some little distance, and then spread out to intervals of about a dozen yards. Each was armed with a revolver, and each was to maintain his direction by the simple expedient of keeping uphill all the time, a scheme which eventually must lead them to the summit of Good Defence.

The sea mist was both friend and enemy to them, for without its cover the attack could never have been launched: but on the other hand they had not got a

hundred yards before they had lost touch with one another.

They were three brave men; and Carl in particular was determined about the business, for almost his only friend in life had been the man he had helped to bury on the previous afternoon. Probably his determination was his undoing, for he pushed on a little more quickly than the other two, and threw the whole scheme out of gear by losing touch with them.

Lodder was lost when he was startled by two revolver-shots some thirty yards ahead, and it was by pure chance that a patch of mist lifted for a moment and showed the big man the shadowy form of one of his helpers close at hand. He had not even recognized who it was before the sharp crack of a rifle rang out and his problem was solved for him. Bauer's voice called out gutturally in pain, and Lodder could see him drop to the ground before the mist closed round him once more like a curtain.

The big man hesitated. Carl must have fired the two revolver-shots. If they had been successful Carl would have called out, and in the circumstances his silence was ominous. Bauer he knew to be at least wounded. The big man was no coward, but he did not relish the job of pressing home the attack single-handed against such a determined defence, and, making his way as best he could to where he judged Bauer to be, he began to call very softly, "Bauer! Bauer! . . ."

The attack in the dawn, the most determined yet launched against the Rock of Good Defence, and for five seconds within a hairbreadth of success, had failed.

Once the sun had risen the mist rolled away rapidly,

and George was able to relax his tension, and take stock of things. He first paid attention to the man who lay not three feet away, his hands still outstretched towards the top of the rock

A glance was sufficient to show that he was dead. Actually the butt of the rifle had broken his skull in two places, and consciousness and life had been knocked out of him simultaneously. His revolver lay under his crumpled-up body. It was of the heavy Service pattern, and four chambers were still loaded. George slipped it triumphantly into his pocket. He had seen the dead man before—from the window of Graham Rivers' bed-sitting-room in Windsor Chambers; and now he marvelled to think of what had happened since then, and that only five days separated a debonair, carefree young gentleman of fashionable Jervyne Street from a desperate, hunted creature on a rock, driven to extremity and in the direst need.

This thought of the incongruity of what had happened to him, and of the apparently immense distance of time that separated him from the beginning of all these adventures, came to trouble him constantly during the day, so that more than once he found himself crying out aloud, "But it's *absurd*! It simply *can't* be only five days! It seems weeks and months." He tried to check himself doing this, and began to fear that he was getting a little unbalanced.

He forced himself to the gruesome task of searching the dead man's pockets in the possibility of finding food of some sort, for food and drink had now become a matter of the extremest urgency. But beyond a few letters and the usual jumble of small things, keys and the like, he found nothing. He rolled the body to some

distance away, and once more took up his station by Verney.

The two men faced each other.

"I'm afraid I wasn't much use to you," Verney said rather shamefacedly. "I seem to go all to pieces in a scrap

George made light of this. As a matter of fact, he had already unconsciously realized that the business of getting them out of the hole they were in would depend on him and him alone, and he did not even count on help from Verney. What he was thinking of at the moment was Verney's looks. The man had a five days' growth of beard on him, and was drawn and haggard from two nights of exposure. "Instructive how soon we slip back to the primitive," George thought, and had their few conveniences included a mirror the thought would have occurred to him even more forcibly, for in addition to a stubble of five days' growth one cheek was caked in blood from the wound made by the splinter of rock, and his whole face was blackened by the nearness of the second revolver-shot, which must have missed him by a miracle.

They had no food, and had they had any George doubted the ability of his tongue and throat to deal with it until he had tasted water first.

He still had four cigarettes left, and he treated himself to one during the morning. He looked on those cigarettes as a sort of omen, feeling that as long as they lasted there would be some sort of hope.

The usual futile waving to boats happened every two or three hours, and beyond this little was said or done. George kept an ever-watchful eye on the house, which had once more become completely quiet, but he did not

think much about it. His mind was falling into that sort of numb inertia which prolonged lack of food induces in a man, and all the time his brain was tormented by visions of remembered and imagined drinks. He began to dwell particularly on the inside of a tiny primitive inn he had once called at when on a walking tour in Somerset. He could not remember the name of the village, which worried him unduly, but the mental picture of the place stood tantalizingly clear and vivid before him. The inn was set back a little from a sleepy by-road. There was a bench outside it and a sign, and the roof was thatched as roofs round there have been thatched time out of mind. Inside—you had to duck your head to enter, he remembered—it was long, and low and cool. The floor was of giant stone flags, the tables scrubbed white. Everything was gracious and friendly and simple. And on the table stood a pint pewter pot of beer—beer in a pewter pot nectar indeed! He had to fight to put this vision out of his mind and concentrate on immediate realities: and he found himself worrying absurdly about the name of the village, though he knew that it did not matter, and assured himself so once or twice aloud.

During the afternoon Verney slept a good deal, but George would not let himself relax. His eyes were burning through lack of rest, and his tongue felt swollen and furred: but he sat there grimly, watching the queer house, the rifle resting on his crossed legs.

At one of the rare intervals when they talked together he heard again from Verney what had already been told between them when they were both in hiding up the tree, the story of his disappearance from Clarence's Hotel.

Verney had gone into his bedroom to rest for half an hour before tackling the mountain of work of all sorts that awaited him. Stathers had come in with a glass.

"Drink this up, sir," he said. "It'll pull you together."

Verney drank it and lay down, and the next thing he remembered was waking up in the politely veiled captivity of Northwood House.

"Looks as though Stathers sold the pass all right," George commented tersely. "It will give me great pleasure to have five minutes alone with him when we get back."

"I dare say it was my fault," Verney said. "Stathers made such a wonderful secretary that I had begun to forget he was a human being. I set out to humanize the world, and forgot the man at my side."

"I'll humanize him!" George muttered under his breath. "I'll paralyse him!"

"They say every man has his price," Verney went on after a while. "I don't know what Stathers' was—money or a woman, I suppose. It seems a little thing to set against what we were trying to do."

"What we are *going* to do."

Verney was silent for a minute or two. Then he faced George, and said in a curiously constrained voice, "It's true about every man and his price, though, Berkley. And another thing's true. To every Spartan his fox. Every one's got a boggy of some sort. I've got mine, and it's on me now. It's physical fear. That's why I was no use this morning in the scrap. I can't help it. I've been like it ever since I was a kid. I've always had a horror of a rough-and-tumble—what you call a rough house—even if it was only in fun. It isn't that I'm afraid of

as he could, "and I'll bring back something that will cheer us both up never fear"

During that same day the farmhouse, which remained so grimly quiet outside, showed little enough activity in its interior.

A council of war was held directly after the attack in the dawn had ended in ignominious failure. The Doctor, seated comfortably by a blazing fire, presided. Lodder and Hilda were there, and Bauer, nursing a wounded arm.

"It seems these two men are invincible," the Doctor sneered.

Lodder, with the tension of being under fire still on him, was terse. "It isn't the number of men that counts, it's where they are, and the rifle."

"One single rifle"

"Yes, one single rifle, but it's already killed two of us"

"Perhaps the attacks have not been as well conducted as they might have been"

Lodder laughed. "The only chance we ever had," he said, "was for all of us to rush the place straight away, before Berkley realized its possibilities—every man jack of us. Then we might have stood some sort of chance. But that scheme didn't appeal to some of us, and the result is we've lost Carl and that other poor fool, and God alone knows what has happened to Trenner. I tell you, we're in a mess"

"Do you mean you're content to let two men hold up half a dozen of us?"

"There aren't half a dozen of us, Berkley's wiping off the odds. Two out of the house have gone, and we don't know about Trenner; that leaves three of us for

certain, you and me and Bauer here, who's been hit once. And it isn't only two men we're up against, it's two men on a rock with a rifle, and one of them a crack shot. You walk out of that back door and see what happens " \

The Doctor nodded. He did not care much for the way Lodder was addressing him, but he realized the truth of what was said, and he did not wish to antagonize his subordinates. "All right," he said quietly. "We shall think of something. Meanwhile I expect you both want some food and rest." He dismissed the three of them with a gesture, but as they filed out of the room his eyes caught those of the woman and drew her back again.

All through that day the house was quiet inside with that curious expectant quietness which marks a besieged city. The quietness got on Lodder's nerves. He was a brave man, and he fretted under the sense of defeat. The Doctor stayed in his own room all the afternoon, and Bauer was lying down, nursing his arm, which had been slightly wounded by a grazing shot. Where the woman Hilda was Lodder did not know and would not inquire. The day-long inaction and the sense of being at the mercy of an opponent at whom he could not hit back had made the big man in a foul temper, and towards evening, when he made his way back to his own room and kicked open the door, he was well enough pleased to see Grace Trenner bending over the fire replenishing it.

She looked up in silence as he came in, and in silence watched him shut the door. Since the siege had been set up she and her sister were living in the house, doing not only their usual housework, but the cooking as well,

for Mrs Trenner was at the steading, nursing her wounded husband.

Grace was a fine figure of a girl, and Lodder looked at her admiringly. She was good to the eye after hours of boring inactivity. She returned his gaze steadily, but he could see a pulse racing in her neck.

"No one here to butt in and spoil sport," he said with a chuckle.

"No, no one," she said quietly.

Something about her seriousness made Lodder laugh and her lack of any sort of panic appealed to him. He knew that she was frightened, and he admired her for not showing it. He threw himself down in a chair and flung one leg over the arm of it. He looked like some overfed giant of Tudor days.

"Look here, Grace," he said genially, "what's the matter? Why don't you try to like me a bit? What's the good of being enemies? Sit down and enjoy yourself: we're alone."

"Not quite alone," she warned him.

"Why? How do you mean?" he asked.

Her quick ears had heard a light footstep in the passage outside. "Somebody's coming," she said.

Lodder too heard the steps by now, and he was afraid it presaged trouble for him. He did not want Grace to go, and he pointed to the heavy curtains that hung in front of the French window giving on to the garden. "Hide behind there," he said in a low voice, "and I'll soon get rid of her."

Grace had hardly stepped into her hiding-place before the door was opened without any preliminary knock, and the woman Hilda came into the room.

"You're alone, Stephan?" she asked.

"More than you've been most of the day, isn't it?" he countered

She asked for a cigarette, and when it was lit she sat down and said, "You know I had no desire to be with him"

"No?"

"You know that, Stephan."

"And now he's tired of you you come to me"

"That's not fair"

Lodder laughed. He had a brutal way of laughing with his heavy head thrown back and his bull neck bulging over his collar

"This place is getting on my nerves, Stephan"

"It's got on mine, but we've got to lump that."

"Why, in God's name, don't we get on with the business?"

"Because a man with a rifle is better armed than one with a revolver—that's why."

"But what are we going to do?"

"If I am not interrupting you, may I tell you what we are going to do?"

Both Lodder and the woman jumped round at the unexpected voice from the doorway. The thin-lipped Doctor stood there, smiling. Hilda had not shut the door behind her, and he must have been hard on her heels. It was not the first time the man's catlike way of going about had riled Lodder. He flushed angrily, and said, "I didn't hear you knock."

"Because I didn't knock, my dear Lodder," the Doctor smiled. "Why should I?"

"Because this happens to be my room"

"You fool!" The words were spat out in a white-hot undertone, and even big Lodder recoiled slightly as the

Doctor took four quick steps into the room and stood over him. His thin face seemed to be lit up by some diabolical fire from behind, and words came witheringly out of his lips. "Your room! Your room! In God's name, man, what does a room matter compared to what we have in hand? Work is waiting for us which will blaze across the world, and all you can think of is your room, your woman, your tin-pot dignity! Things have gone wrong at a time when we cannot afford to have them go wrong. We must mend them: we can mend them, and we will. I have made up my mind. Listen! We won't be fools enough to risk any more rushing of the rock where this suicidal young Englishman is. It was your idea to attack him there: you said an hour would see the end of him. Two days have only seen the end of Carl and the other one. No more of that. Luck has been with him so far—well, we'll give luck no more chance. To-morrow Bauer must get to the hangar somehow and take the plane away. Messel will be waiting in England wondering what has become of us. Once Bauer meets him he can get as many rifles as he likes—a machine-gun, is necessary. He can be back before dark to-morrow, and Mr Berkley's little spurt of glory will flicker out. And, by God, if I take him alive I'll make him amply sorry for the delay he has caused! When the time comes to-morrow set up what diversion you like to draw his fire as long as Bauer gets to the hangar. That is the plan and those are my orders. Do you understand?"

Lodder nodded slowly. "Yes, I understand," he said. "It is the best way of dealing with it."

The Doctor had regained his sardonic smile once more. "I am glad you approve," he said softly, and, stepping

to one side, he bowed with exaggerated courtesy for Hilda to leave the room before him

When they had both left the room Lodder reached across to the curtain and twitched it to one side.

But not even his second best remained to him. Grace no longer stood there, and a cold little breeze blew through the unfastened French window

"Bolted!" thought Lodder angrily. "God damn it, but these women are touchy cattle!" He shut the window with an oath, and flung himself down angrily before the fire. The only pleasant task that remained was imagining how his present insults and injuries would be avenged once the business on hand had been carried to its successful conclusion. Except to regret her absence in an animal way, he did not trouble further about Grace Trenner—an unwise thing. Lodder of all men should have known that women can play a lone hand at times

In another part of the island another man was settling down with what comfort he could for his evening meal. Reuben Trenner found comfort hard to come by because of his broken shoulder-bone, but he was propped up on the sofa with all the cushions of the house, and his wife waited on him hand and foot. His face still showed an ugly cut where the stone had hit him, and Trenner had definitely made up his mind that if the people at the house wanted any more rock-climbing done after escaped men they would have to do it themselves.

The lamp hanging from the ceiling threw a pleasantly soft light on the table, which Mrs Trenner was busy preparing. She stopped in the act of arranging their cups and saucers, and, with head uplifted, said, "What was that, Trenner?"

"What was what?"

"I thought I heard a noise at the window."

"Like enough you did. Have you never heard the wind before?"

On the instant the door opened, and a voice said, "Stand still, both of you, or I shoot!"

A cup dropped from Mrs Trenner's hand and smashed to smithereens on the floor. It was the only sound that broke the silence as they both stared at the bearded, blackened apparition of a man who stood in the doorway covering them with a revolver.

CHAPTER XVII

A HUNGRY MAN

GEORGE was well pleased with the scene that confronted him. Trenner, with one arm and shoulder all swathed in bandages, was evidently no sort of adversary, and the woman was white with fright. Well might she be, for exposure, want of sleep, and hunger had made George Berkley look a pretty desperate sort of ruffian. He had had a disappointing journey to get there that evening. When he left the Rock of Good Defence he had crawled the first two hundred yards or so for fear some one was keeping watch on them from the house, and then he set out on a great detour, taking advantage of the scrubby bushes that lay away to the left, and aiming all the time at ending up behind the aeroplane hangar. He had made up his mind that if he could not use the 'plane nobody else should.

His detour led him farther afield than he had intended, and he found to his dismay that it necessitated traversing a deep ravine, which was hidden by a belt of trees. There was nothing for it but to scramble down the steep slope and up again the other side, and, indeed, under normal conditions George would have made light of it, but in his weakened state he found the business punishing enough, and when at the bottom of the downward slope he missed a foothold, and slid down into a quagmire of ice-cold water, he felt that little else remained to complete his misery. He was wet almost to his middle, and his teeth were chattering with cold. He

pulled himself out of the muddy mess as best he could and fought his way painfully up the farther slope of the ravine. When at length he gained the top he sank down on the ground exhausted by the climb, and it was five minutes before he felt strong enough to go on.

He was now cut off by the lie of the ground from all sight of his objective, and he had to steer his course by guesswork. The sound of the sea on his left hand was a useful indication of his nearness to the coast all the time, and after going westward for about ten minutes he swung inland, and commenced the circling movement which he hoped would bring him at the back of the aeroplane hanger.

He was climbing again now slightly, and as he approached the crest of the gentle rise he went on all fours, and moved cautiously. If he had misjudged his distance he might emerge on the skyline in full sight of anyone watching from the house, and in spite of an occasional cloud there was enough moonlight to worry him.

When eventually he was able by stretching up to look over the ridge from which all the land sloped gently towards the aerodrome and the house beyond he blessed his lucky stars. It seemed as though the fates had relented a little. Good luck more than good judgment had brought him dead behind the low hump of the hanger, so that he was able to get to his feet and walk straight ahead without any danger of being seen.

He took this as a good omen, and went forward slowly, looking about for bits of bracken and dry sticks and leaves. He soon had quite a pile of fairly easily fireable material, and with this in his arms he made his way right up to the back of the hanger. Here against the centre of the back wall he stacked his firewood.

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heaping it over a nucleus of letters and envelopes, leaves from his notebook, and anything in the way of paper he could spare from his breast-pocket. He noted with delight that the hangar was built entirely of wood, roof and all, and he had great hopes that his plan would succeed. He worked quickly, because all the time his mind was back with Verney on Good Defence, wondering if all was well there, but his fingers were so numb with cold that he took twice as long over everything as he should have done.

At last his bonfire was well and truly laid, and he felt for his precious box of matches. The first feel of his pocket warned him of tragedy. His wetting had come higher than he had thought, and the inside of his pocket was clammy oozy. Still hoping that the worst might not have happened, he drew out the box of matches and tried to strike one. There was not a splutter, match and box were sodden. With the certainty that it was futile, he tried every match in the box, until a heap of them, broken, damp, and useless, lay on the ground at his feet.

He wasted precious time and breath in a string of futile oaths; but for the accident of a missed foothold things would have been wearing a very different complexion.

George was sick with disappointment, and for a moment went all to pieces; but common sense and doggedness came to save him, and he could even raise the ghost of a grin. "Never thought I should want a match so badly," he thought. "Well, here's for the next part of the programme, anyway."

Still keeping the hangar between himself and the house, he retraced his steps to the top of the slight ridge, and, once on its westward slope, struck off half right

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a desperate man " And with his five days' growth of beard and the scar caked with blood across one cheek he looked desperate His quiet, even tone carried conviction, and neither Trenner nor his wife offered to move an inch.

George stood watching them for a half-minute in grim silence. Then he said, "Good! You've got some sense, anyway." Keeping the revolver levelled in his right hand, he advanced to the table, and with his left hand started to cram food into his pockets First of all he whisked four sausages off a plate, and the very sight and smell of them, let alone the touch, made his mouth water Next he helped himself to half a dozen thick slices of bread that were ready cut, and to a large hunk of the excellent cheese he had eaten in the same room three days before There was a loaf of bread, which he left alone, as it was too big to get into his pocket, but he seized eagerly on a tongue that Mrs Trenner had turned out of its tin not five minutes before he came in This comprehensive raid pretty well exhausted what the table had to offer him, and he was satisfied with what he had, knowing that it was more than enough for their immediate needs A carafe of water stood by Trenner's side, and this George lifted bodily from the table

He was now in a fever to get back to the safety of Good Defence before Trenner and his wife could give the alarm to those up at the house With the precious carafe clutched tightly in his left hand and the revolver still levelled in his right, he backed towards the door.

Before he reached it he stopped, and addressed Trenner once more. "As you value your life, Trenner, tell me where I can get a boat of some sort to take me off the island."

Trenner was silent.

"I'm in a hurry," George reminded him quietly. "If there's a boat on the island I want to know where it is."

"You're unlucky," Trenner answered surily. "I'm not allowed to keep a boat by them up there."

"Haven't they got one anywhere?"

"No. They come and go in that flying-machine."

George studied the man for thirty seconds or so. Impossible to tell whether it was the truth or not. On the other hand, equally impossible to force him to say what he didn't want to say. And time, precious time, was slipping by: he did not want to leave Verney alone a second longer than necessary. He had to accept what he was told. He nodded curtly. "I shall be outside for the next half-hour," he lied, "and if anyone moves out of this house I shall shoot. I'm a pretty good shot—you know that," and, backing out of the door, he slammed it behind him and ran.

When he had gone a couple of hundred yards he stopped, and putting the carafe to his lips took a good swig at the ice-cold well-water. He took a mouthful of it, and swilled it slowly and luxuriously over his parched tongue before letting it trickle slowly down his dust-dry throat. It was nectar. Only a man who has suffered from an extremity of thirst can know what the satisfaction of it means. George took a second mouthful, and it tasted even better than the first. Then, though his whole body craved for more, he resolutely put the carafe from his lips and set out at a jog-trot for Good Defence.

His pace was impeded by fear of spilling so much as a drop of his precious liquid, but luckily the sky had cleared, and he could see his way easily in the moonlight. Once he slipped and went down on one knee and

for two horrible seconds he thought the carafe must have broken on one of the rocks that strewed his path, but to his joy and relief the stout, commonplace glass took no harm from the knock, and he started off again more cautiously, with a prayer of relief on his lips

When he got back to the edge of the open part which surrounded Good Defence he halted, and looked anxiously at the rock. There was no sign of activity there or at the house. He decided that the best thing was to make a dash for it, and, collecting himself, he began to run steadily up the bare slope. He half expected a shot to ring out at any moment, and his sole consolation was the thought "Thank God Verney can't be much of a shot!" When he had covered half the distance to the summit of the rock he saw Verney's head and shoulders appear over the hollow depression in the top of it, and, standing stock-still, he called in a low voice, "Verney, Verney, it's all right! It's me—Berkley" The figure on the rock raised a hand in acknowledgment, and George, relieved, walked the rest of the distance up the slope and gained the summit of Good Defence.

Verney was there, shivering with cold and fear. He had given George up for lost, and had imagined, he said, a dozen menacing figures in the moonlight, until he grew afraid almost to keep watch, and huddled up, hoping for the best.

"And the best has come," George assured him, proffering the carafe "I told you I'd bring back something to cheer us up, and, by God, I have! Here, man—water! *Water!* Drink, drink!"

Verney's hands were already grasping the thick glass bottle and his parched lips sucking at its orifice

George snatched it away almost instantly. "Don't swallow it like that, you fool! Swill it round and round your mouth, and then swallow slowly. And it's got to last. Only two mouthfuls now."

Once more he let Verney have the carafe, but he kept a rigorous eye on it, and when the regulation two mouthfuls had been taken he forcibly took it away again.

Verney beseeched him piteously for more, but George was adamant. He put the carafe in a safe place, propped up on either side by stones. "That's enough for the present," he said. "Maybe we'll have another mouthful each when we've eaten."

"Eaten?"

"Yes." George laughed, and triumphantly began to empty his pockets. He brought out the bread and sausages, but the tongue he kept wisely in reserve. There would be a time later, he knew well enough when reserves would be welcome.

Verney fell on the food like a maniac, and George had to push him off forcibly.

"My God, Berkley, aren't you going to let me have any?" the man cried.

"Don't be a fool!" George ordered. "Here, let me share it up. Two sausages each and three slices of bread. The bread's wet from my pocket: I couldn't help that. There's your share, and eat it slowly."

For the next three minutes nothing was said by either man. Hunger had brought them to the level of animals, and, like animals, they gloated over their scraps of food. Verney finished his first, and sat sucking his fingers and eyeing wolfishly George's more slowly disappearing share.

George forced himself to chew every mouthful slowly

and deliberately. At length he too had finished, and he yielded to Verney's pleadings to the extent of allowing them one small mouthful each from the carafe. Then it was restored once more to its safety spot, and they sat and talked.

Water and food, meagre though both had been, had made new men of them. New courage and resolution had come to them. Verney was full of praise for George's energy and resource. George himself thanked luck for a good deal of his success, but, lucky or not, it tasted sweet. He felt that the Doctor and his lot could still be given a run for their money, but only, he knew, if the strictest discipline was preserved. He took the wrist-watch from Verney and regulated their hours of watching and resting; he had a feeling that they might need all their energies on the morrow.

Verney slept for the first two hours, and when they were finished the night winds were blowing cold, and there was a hint of frost in the air.

Before he woke Verney George moved silently to the carafe and marked with a pocket pencil the level of the water on the glass. Then he shook Verney by the shoulder, handed over the rifle, cartridge-belt, and wrist-watch, and, curling himself up, fell instantly into badly needed sleep.

He could have sworn that he had hardly closed his eyes before he was opening them again, with Verney speaking quietly in his ear.

"Come on, Berkley! Sorry to have to wake you. Two o'clock."

The watch and the stars corroborated the unbelievable statement, and George forced himself to wake.

Verney fell asleep instantly, and George felt as lonely

and cold and uncourageous as a man can feel at two in the morning.

When he had been watching for twenty minutes or so a thought struck him, and he moved over to where the carafe stood. Twice he inspected it, standing it very carefully on an even piece of rock, so that there could be no mistake. The level of the water was nearly half an inch below his tell-tale mark. George put it back into its resting-place, and looked at the sleeping form of Verney quizzically. Great men had their littleness, it seemed.

"Looks as though I've got to save you in spite of yourself, you beggar! ' he said aloud "And, by the Holy City, I'll do it! "

CHAPTER XVIII

TONGUE

GEORGE had so arranged the order of watching that he was on duty at daybreak. He half expected that another attempt to rush the rock might be made in the dim light of the dawn, but nothing happened, and the sun mounted steadily on the lifeless scene that was already indelibly stamped on his mind.

He said nothing about the water to Verne, but he would not yield an inch to the latter's entreaty for a drink. "Wait till mid-morning," was the only answer. "You'll want it more then."

Verney was inclined to be querulous and downcast; but he cheered up a good deal when towards eleven o'clock George produced the tongue which he had secretly kept in reserve.

The tongue was first of all cut into two halves, one of which George resolutely put back in his pocket against future needs, then the other half was divided into two equal portions, and each man ate his according to his fancy. George chewed slowly, and swallowed each minute, well-masticated portion reluctantly. He could not honestly have said that he found the tongue tasty, but it was food, and that was the all-important thing.

When they had both finished eating he served out a ration of water, one mouthful each, and he took good care that Verney had no more than was due to him.

His cigarettes had survived the soaking of yesterday, but now he had no matches for a light, and he had to

to be a little less violent, and the intervals between his periods of retching became longer. In a further ten minutes he felt pretty confident that the attack had passed, and he noted too that Verney was lying still, and seemed easier.

George felt as weak as a kitten and quite dizzy, so that he doubted if he could have stood upright, but he was past the worst, of that he felt certain, and somewhere in his obstinately tenacious nature the germ of grim determination to win through against all hazards reasserted itself.

He was startled out of the drowsiness of convalescence by a sudden roar which broke out shatteringly over the silent island. Instantly he grasped his rifle and looked out over the rock. No one was in sight, but the doors of the aeroplane hangar were open, and he realized what had happened. Those open doors and that roaring engine spelled disaster. They meant reinforcements against Good Defence, and Good Defence was impregnable only as long as it held the only gun on the island.

The noise of the engine worked up to a deafening *crescendo*, and George steadied himself to take aim. He knew better than anyone could tell him the long odds against a hit now, but there was always the chance that a stray bullet might find the petrol-tank or some other vital spot in the machine.

He fired the moment the 'plane appeared in the doorway of the hangar, but apparently without success, for the machine taxied rapidly across the level ground, gaining speed all the time. George reloaded and fired again just as it was taking off. He was pretty certain that he hit the fuselage somewhere, but the 'plane lifted

steadily and strongly into the air, and passed over the house, mounting all the time

In a sudden frenzy of disappointment and rage George fired a third futile shot after it, with no more effect than before. The 'plane felt the air now, and after a preliminary circling movement to gain height headed eastward, and droned away at a great speed towards the mainland.

George gazed after it until it was no more than a midge-like speck against the light-filled sky.

"*Hell!*" he said, compressing all the feeling in the world into the one terse word. He was desperately sorry now that he had wasted those three precious shots; it left him with only five cartridges in reserve. He had been able to see that there was only one man in the 'plane, and he began to calculate the forces still against him. Of the six men in the house originally he knew that two were killed and Trenner was injured. One had gone away in the 'plane for help, which left only two behind, almost certainly the Doctor himself and friend Lodder. Two against two. On the face of it it sounded attractive enough after the odds that only lately they had been up against, but George had a streak of common sense in his nature that acted as a sane corrective of many an optimistic scheme. So far nearly all his strength had lain in the fact that he was the defending party. If he abandoned defence and tried to attack the house matters would wear a very different complexion. But, even so, there was a part of him that would dearly have loved to have a smack at it. He glanced at Verney, and there and then abandoned all idea of fighting initiative. Verney had not recovered properly from the spasm of sickness that had seized them both, and he lay curled up, his eyes shut, his face

a bad grey colour. If ever a man looked a non-starter in a scrap it was Paul Verney, George thought, a trifle bitterly, and he settled down to wait, as philosophically as might be, whatever the gods sent.

If the 'plane was not back with reinforcements by evening he was secretly determined to attempt the attack on the house under cover of the darkness, and single-handed, if need be.

He hardly bothered now about keeping watch, being perfectly certain that no attack would be made from the house until reinforcements arrived. Early in the afternoon he issued a further ration of water, which practically exhausted their supply. The drink seemed to do Verney good; he sat up and talked a little, and his face was a better colour. As the time went on, and George's straining ears caught no hint of the sound he expected and feared, his hopes began to rise a little, but he did not speak about his tentative plans to Verney, and for the most part they sat in silence, each man busy with his own thoughts.

At four o'clock Verney startled him with a cry, and, turning from his half-hearted watch on the house, George looked seaward, where the other man was pointing at a large liner deceptively close to the island. He had so completely given up all thought of the sea as a means of escape that this sudden gleam of hope unbalanced him for the moment. He tore off his coat and waved it with all his might. Verney did the same, and the vessel seemed so close in the bright sunlight that it was incredible that they could go unnoticed.

There was something damnably impersonal and uncaring about the huge three-funnelled thing as she nosed her way steadily through the calm sea.

"My God, they've got to see us!" George cried hoarsely, waving with all his might, and a second later he added almost incredulously, "And, by God, *they have seen us!*"

There was no mistake about it. from the promenade deck there was a fluttering of white—a tiny movement only, but one charged with drama for two men in desperate straits. Some one was waving a handkerchief. George felt himself getting a bit out of hand, and Verney was shouting hysterically. "Steady!" George counselled. "No good shouting. They can't possibly hear anything at this distance. Wave, man, wave!"

They redoubled their frantic efforts, and the handkerchief, after being still for a moment, fluttered again. In spite of his exhortation George found himself shouting as well as Verney.

On board the s.s. *Nemean* a man and his wife leaned against the port rail of the promenade deck. They were England bound after long enough in climes and circumstances as far remote from England as possible. Six long weeks on the sea were ending, and nostalgia for English sights and sounds made the last few hours seem intolerably long.

"Wonder what that little island is?" the man said, breaking a long silence. "I never knew there were any English islands, except Lundy and the Isle of Wight."

"It just shows your ignorance," the woman answered laughingly.

"What is it, then, Mrs. Clever?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. One of the Islands of the Blessed, after so long from home."

"I say. there's somebody on it."

"My dear man, we aren't in the middle of the Australian desert any longer. Of course there's somebody on it."

"They're waving."

"Where?"

"On the top of the cliff there—can't you see?"

"No—— Yes, I can The dears, they're glad to see us! Wave back. Henry."

The man laughingly kept his arms folded, and his wife snatched a handkerchief from his breast-pocket and waved it vigorously. "You boor, Henry!" she chided him. "Aren't you glad to be back?"

After a couple of minutes she said, "They seem to be frightfully keen on this waving business"

"Naturally," her husband teased her. "They are frightfully glad to see us"

"I suppose they are all right, Henry?"

"What on earth do you mean, all right?"

"Not stranded or anything?"

The man shaded his eyes and peered with mock intentness towards the receding island. "Now, let me see," he answered slowly. "Ah, I think I can recognize them at last—Robinson Crusoe and old Man Friday——"

"Don't be a fool Henry! They might be two fishermen or something stranded."

"My dear, if they got on the island they must have a boat: and if they have a boat they can get off it. That's logic, isn't it?"

"Masculine logic," his wife admitted

"Besides, in all probability they live there: and I must say if I lived on a spot like that I'd get so bored I'd gladly wave at everything I saw."

"You don't think we ought to tell one of the officers?"

Henry laughed a hearty, derisive masculine laugh. "Good Lord, no!" he said. "There's the four o'clock news bulletin. Let's go and hear if there's anything exciting."

"Nothing more exciting than our coming home," the woman said, taking his arm and squeezing it. They left the contemplation of the island and its waving men, and made their way to where a loud-speaker stood, already surrounded by an idle group of news-hungry, home-hungry folk.

In five minutes' time when the short bulletin was finished, the group dispersed, talking excitedly among themselves. The news was tantalizing in its cryptic brevity. Paul Verney had disappeared, and the Peace Pact proceedings, which had been fixed for noon on the following day, might have to be postponed. Before long the ship, like a microcosm of the whole world, was buzzing with the news. Verney had disappeared. How and where, no man knew, but what all men did know, and what up and down England all men said in varying ways to one another was: *There's dirty work somewhere. If they can't find Verney it's good-bye to the Peace Pact, and then—*

The man and the woman went back slowly to the port side. The news had driven out of their heads all thought of the unimportant island, which now lay well astern.

"What do you think it means, Henry?" the woman asked.

'Dunno, quite. It looks bad, though. Verney disappearing on the eve of the Peace Pact business means something. I don't like it.'

CHAPTER XIX

GRACE

ALL that he saw was the head and shoulders of the girl Grace Trenner appearing over the cliff edge.

George made his way towards her not without misgiving, and with his rifle ready for action in his hand. When he got as far as the cliff edge he could see that she was alone, and he marvelled that a girl should have attempted and achieved that difficult climb.

She was out of breath, and she spoke quickly, and she was scared, but what she said was to the point. "They are sending for a machine-gun by the flying-machine."

George nodded, and asked the all-important question "Do you know when it is coming back?"

"No. But you must go."

In spite of his plight George managed to smile. "Only one little thing is delaying us," he pointed out. "We can't walk on water."

"But I'll show you the boat."

"The *what*?"

"The boat—my father's boat. He isn't allowed to keep one by them up at the house, but we can't fish without it, and we keep it hidden in a cave when they are here."

George stared at her foolishly. For a moment he felt bowled over, as though some sudden stroke of ill fortune had arrived, instead of this incredible intervention of Providence. Then, as his mind took a firm grasp on what the girl said, and all it implied, his dirty, blood-caked, haggard face broke into a broad smile.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" he cried "D'you hear that, Verney? A boat! A *boat*, man! We'll do it yet!" All apathy had left him now, he was on fire to take advantage of the miracle that had befallen them.

The girl suggested that they climb down the cliff by the route which she had taken up it, and in spite of the difficulty involved George agreed. To reach the cave where the boat was by any other route meant a long detour, as the girl assured him, and their exodus from Good Defence would have to be in full view of the house. If they went down the cliff no one at the house would know they had abandoned their position, and this might gain them valuable minutes' grace when most they were needed.

"You must be quick!" the girl urged them, and George needed no reminding of it. His plans to abandon the rock were soon made, it was a question simply of whether he should take the rifle with him or not. Reluctantly he decided not to. Unencumbered movement was essential above all else, and he was about to leave the rifle behind when the girl suggested the simple alternative of throwing it down on to the sands below. Rifle and cartridge-belt were down in a flash, and George grinned a little foolishly for not thinking of such an expedient himself. He then leaned over the cliff edge and studied the precipitous face of it.

"Don't look at it too long!" the girl urged "It's difficult, but not too bad." Fear kept her in a fever to start the descent.

George nodded "You go first," he said; "you know the ropes. Verney, you follow, and I'll bring up the rear."

Grace Tierner needed no further orders. Straightway

she left the ledge where she was standing in comparative comfort and began with sure hands and feet to seek the best way down.

Verney followed willingly enough, and George, hanging over the cliff edge, watched the first part of the descent. After a couple of minutes he made his way back to the other edge of Good Defence and looked at the house. There were no signs that their retreat had been noticed. Cheered by this, he came back again to the edge of the cliff and, swinging a leg over, began the climb. He paused for a moment to take a last look at Good Defence—a few square yards of rocky turf, here and there a spent cartridge-case, in patches the ugly evidences of their illness, just beyond, and now out of his sight, the body of a dead man. George studied it all. It was inconceivable that he should ever be more glad to leave any spot in his life, and yet in a perverted, human way he had a sort of affection for it. On that bit of rock he had been brought very close to things primitive and elemental. He had fought there against odds, and held his own. "You served me well," he thought, "and dammit, we'll win through yet," and, glancing below him, he sought with his toe for the first foothold. The abandonment of Good Defence was complete.

Grace Trenner was already more than a third of the way down the cliff, climbing strongly. She had fisherman's hands and feet and a fisherman's head for height, and this business of clinging to a vertical wall some sixty feet high, with nothing more to stand on than a three-inch ledge of out-jutting rock, came easily to her. It came less easily to men weakened by hunger and exposure, and racked by their recent severe vomiting. George made a good start, and was congratulating him-

self on the easy going when he made the fatal mistake of looking down to the sands below to see what distance yet remained

He found it almost impossible to lift his head again, his eyes were hypnotized by that far-off and yet inviting floor. At one second it seemed near, and at the next it was an infinite dizzy distance away, seductively soft and welcoming, so that he felt nothing could be more desirable than to loose the grip of his already aching fingers and drop down, down, down . . .

He forced himself to look up. His knees had turned to water, and a line of perspiration stood cold across his forehead. His heart was thumping like a steam-hammer. "Damn' fool!" he admonished himself. "Much more of that sort of thing, and you're done." Everything in him was tugging his eyes downward again, but by a supreme effort of will he forced his attention on the cliff face, and, still weak with sheer funk, began a tentative descent once more.

With the first movement he felt better, and in three minutes he was going strong again. There was a great clamour of outraged seagulls swirling round his head all the time in a beautiful flurry of indignant whiteness, and their antics and noise served to keep his mind distracted. He wondered if they would attack him, and some of the more daring birds came audaciously near to his head, but they never actually offered to molest him.

He was thirty feet down the rock now. He was steadily gaining on Verney, and at last he had to make a traverse for fear of coming down right on top of him. His traverse brought him level with Verney some six feet away, and the moment he reached there he got a shock.

"Come on, you old simpet! ' he chaffed. "It's 'asier going just below."

"*I can't do it!*"

"Nonsense! Here, I'll make a start" He lowered himself about a foot, and waited apprehensively for Verney to move

The man stayed still, except that he trembled violently. Out of a constricted throat he said, "*I can't move!*"

"Like hell you can't move!" George answered grimly, realizing that the situation called for desperate measures. "You've damn' well got to move" He manœuvred himself directly below Verney, and, reaching up, tapped the man's right foot with his hand

"Verney," he said in a hard voice, "listen to me! I've got a loaded revolver here, the one I took from the dead man. What I tell you to do you've got to do, or as truly as God made you I'll fire, and *I won't miss*. This cliff's as easy to climb down as a flight of stairs, and you're going to do it. Understand? Now, then, I want this right foot of yours lower—lower still, where I'm guiding it"

"And God knows," thought George privately, "what I'll do if he doesn't move this time" But he did move. Slowly, haltingly, fearfully, that right foot, steadied by George's guiding hand, moved until it was safely on the ledge below.

"Now the other. Come on!" George ordered, and before Verney knew where he was he found himself eighteen inches lower down the cliff face. Although he was still blue with funk the act of moving had broken the spell that had fascinated him, and, with George just beneath all the time, encouraging, persuading, and

threatening, he began to make slow but continual progress.

As soon as he saw that things were going well George called down to the girl below to go and get the boat out, and when finally he and Verney slithered down the last six feet she was three hundred yards away on the sands.

Both men were showing the strain of the climb on top of everything else they had been through, but George dared not allow themselves any respite.

They hurried along the bottom of the cliffs to where the girl stood waiting and beckoning by the entrance to a cave. Here was a clumsy-looking rowing-boat, like a somewhat heavy edition of the ordinary seaside affair, and round it, hanging from the walls of the cave, were draped Trenner's fishing-nets. The girl had got two pairs of oars in the boat, and she had the rollers ready to help progress over the shingle.

George took it all in at a glance, and he and Verney fell to at once helping the girl push the boat to the entrance to the cave. There were only two rollers, which were simply roughly cylindrical baulks of wood, and as soon as one of these had been passed over by the keel it had to be picked up and taken to the front of the boat and laid down again. This made progress slow, but Grace Trenner worked as hard as any man, and six willing, fear-driven hands soon made themselves felt. They were actually at the mouth of the cave when the girl's quick ears heard something above the everlasting murmur of the sea.

"The flying-machine," she said. "They've come back."

All three stood stock-still while the giant bee-like droning swelled to a *crescendo* that seemed to reach its

maximum directly overhead, then suddenly spluttered, broke out again for a few deafening seconds, and died to nothing.

"Landing," George said grimly. "Come on."

They went at it with a will, and once they got on the sand outside the cave the boat ran fairly easily down to the surf. Luckily the tide was high, beginning to ebb. Water conditions could not have suited them better. Beyond the oars and George's precious rifle and cartridge-belt they had nothing in the boat—no compass, water, or food. There was desperate need for haste.

"It's not much more than ten miles to the mainland," the girl said. "The stars will be out in half an hour. You must keep east all the time, with a touch of north in it. Allow for the tide; it runs fast here, and drags southerly a bit."

George took all this in and nodded. "In you get, Verney!" he ordered crisply. Then the girl helped him launch the boat, and for a moment he stood knee-deep in the breaking surf facing Grace Trenner. He held his hand out. She was scared, and he did not wonder at it. "You're a brave woman," he said. "We'll neither of us forget this all our lives. Please God you get back safely."

"And please God you cross over safely to the mainland," she answered. "There won't be a deal of wind to-night."

They were the last words spoken between them. George gave the boat a push, and, running through the surf after it, jumped in and seized an oar.

Verney was struggling with two oars, but George made him drop one, and they pulled one oar each. Grace Trenner stood watching them for a couple of minutes,

and then, with a wave of her hand, she turned and ran along the face of the cliff. Very soon she was lost to sight, and the men in the boat could see nothing but the slowly receding island and the waste of waters all round them.

The fever of escape still dominated them, so that they pulled with a will, their bodies oblivious for the present of the strain they had been through.

The evening light was rapidly fading to dusk, and both men were watching the sky anxiously.

"We'll never get clear in time," Verney said.

"We will," George answered at once. "It'll be dark in twenty minutes. They don't know we've gone, and they won't take any risks. Pull away!"

What he said about the Doctor not taking risks was amply proved a few minutes later by a burst of unmistakable sound from the island. The seagulls wheeled in clamorous indignation at this fresh invasion of their quiet.

"Machine-gun," George said with grim amusement. "There it goes again. It'll be a case of sucks for the Doctor when they get to the top of the rock. Well, the more ammunition and time they waste the better for us."

Both men were pulling a long, steady stroke, and the sea was glassily calm, so that they drew away from the island with gratifying rapidity. But George was worried. He did not now fear capture by the Doctor's gang chiefly: he reckoned that the darkness which was rapidly falling all round would render them immune from that: but he mistrusted the weather. He knew well enough that they could not expect to pull away on their oars for much more than a coup'e of hours: their

bodies had been through too much hardship and deprivation during the last few days; and he did not like to think what their position would be if the present calm gave way to rougher seas. The western sky was ominously black with cloud, and though this hastened the darkness that he longed for it was not altogether reassuring.

When they had been on the water for an hour the stars which George had been anxiously waiting for began to pin-prick the sky, and he realized at once that he had not allowed sufficiently for the drag to southward Grace Trenner had warned him about. He corrected this, and it was comforting to feel that they were at any rate on the right course. He reckoned that the tide was just beginning to ebb when they left the island, and that they would have the benefit of it for some hours yet; so he ordered Verney to rest, and kept on pulling quietly with two oars himself. Both men kept a sharp look-out for any lights, and half a dozen times they saw the red or green of a passing vessel, but never very near them, and their shouting did no more than torment their ever-thirsty throats.

George kept an anxious eye on the sky. It was as though the stars were chalk-marks on some colossal blackboard, and gradually but inexorably a giant invisible hand was rubbing them all out, beginning in the west. The Pole Star was still clear, and so was Orion, mounting the eastern sky in grandeur, and George stuck to the task of keeping the boat's head true by them, and trying to forget the west.

He said nothing to Verney, who was raving again now about his fears, because he had a shrewd idea that his companion was pretty near the end of his tether, and

had no reserves of either strength or courage to face fresh disaster.

The boat was feeling the extra swell that was beginning to stir the sea, and when George lifted his face questioningly he felt the wind.

Verney must have felt it too. "Getting a bit fresher," he said.

George grunted.

"D'you think it's going to rain?" Verney asked

"Might be a shower." George tried to reassure him.

"Can't hurt us, though, if we keep pulling away.

There was a minute's silence, and then Verney said, "I don't feel I can pull much longer."

"Stick it!" George urged, and to put heart into them both he started, in a villainous voice, to sing a sea chanty he remembered as a child:

"With a long long pull
And a strong strong pull.
Cheerily, lad's, let her go!"

It was a pathetic note of defiance to come from that cockleshell of a craft in the heaving waste of black waters.

"Some one's bound to see us before long," he said. "This water's got plenty of boats in it."

"They haven't seen us yet," Verney answered and almost immediately added, "I think I felt a spot of rain."

George had felt the rain a minute before, but he had kept quiet about it. There was no denying the rain now, though, and in three minutes it was on them in earnest. A real rain-storm had broken overhead, and it fairly hissed and boiled in the water round them. It was drenching devastating, merciless rain; and dropping

his oar, George groped for the bailing-cup, and began to bail vigorously.

Verney had automatically stopped pulling as well, and George shouted to him roughly to carry on with two oars and keep some way on the boat. The sea had freshened considerably, and he knew that they must keep the boat-nose on to it at all costs.

After a quarter of an hour they reversed their rôles, and they continued like this in what seemed an unending nightmare of feverish activity, until neither man had any sense of time or direction left.

George's whole body had passed the last stages of mere fatigue. He felt the pain of utter tiredness like an animal inside him eating him up; and yet, parallel with this feeling, his arms had acquired a sort of mechanical indifference, so that they pulled away at the heavy oars or scooped with the bailing-cup without any volition from his brain.

At length the storm passed over them, and the rain stopped. Both men were sodden to the skin and bitterly cold in spite of their exertions, and to complete his discomfort George was seized suddenly with an excruciating attack of cramp in his stomach muscles. He lay doubled up with pain in the bottom of the boat, and any attempt at rowing was out of the question. Verney, out of whom all driving-power of will had gone, had long since automatically ceased exertion of any kind whenever George did; and under the clouded sky and with an ugly swell on the sea they drifted dangerously on those dark waters.

George managed to struggle on to a thwart and to seize an oar again. His mind was still screwed up to a pitch of determination, though muscle, nerve, and sinew were almost past heeding his commands.

"What the hell have you stopped rowing for, Verney?" he cried. "Get that oar and pull, man! D'you hear? *Pull!*"

Verney tried to obey, and for a few minutes both men pulled away in silence. It was torture to make any movement, and there was no strength in their strokes. George doubted if they were even holding their own against the drift, and he had no idea of their direction. The fear kept haunting him that they had put about inadvertently, and that the turning tide would take them back to the island. He saw Verney collapse over his oar, and it was all he himself could do not to follow suit.

"Looks to me like being beaten on the post," he said to himself harshly, and the thought was a bitter one after so much hardship and endurance. Presently he could pull no more. He bent over his oar, his heart labouring ominously, and was violently sick. He was utterly and completely exhausted, and neither time nor direction nor their ultimate fate meant anything to him.

How long he was like that, and whether he actually fainted or not, George never knew. He was aroused some time later by a faint cry from Verney, and, looking up, he caught sight of a light immediately ahead. The next thing he knew was that a great slice of solid darkness was moving towards them, and seemed to be directly overshadowing their boat. He felt exactly as though he was standing looking up at an inky black skyscraper that was on the point of tumbling on top of him.

What was left of the driving force in his mind called on the very last half-ounce of energy in his sorely spent body.

GRACE

He stumbled forward to where Verney lay sagging over a thwart. "A boat!" he cried, seizing his shoulder and shaking it. "Shout, man, shout!"

Together they raised their voices and shouted into the windy darkness with the desperate strength of men in their last extremity.

England had been searching feverishly for him. England had been pretty well gone over with a fine comb, with no result.

Lord Charles Spencer walked across the room and looked out of the window. The roadway outside was crowded with the usual gaping throng, waiting wide-eyed and dumb for they knew not what, symbolic of democracy.

"The fools," he said softly, "the poor fools! After all, it's in their hands. If they and their kind all over the world really want peace there wouldn't be any doubt about the Pact. But they don't know what they want. They must have a symbol, something, some one, they can follow blindly. The moment that goes they are lost, swayed by every chance emotion, by every breath of suspicion or fear or hatred. Well, we shall see."

The Colonel by his shoulder spoke more bitterly. "Our master," he said, surveying the gaping, sheep-like herd. The Colonel did not like democracies. "Do you think the delegates will jib at signing, P.M.?"

"Yes. This business of Verney has brought back fear—it was meant to, of course—and with fear have come back all the bad old things—jealousies, prejudice, nationalism. When the herd is frightened it stampedes, and when it stampedes it doesn't stop to look where it's going. At twelve to-day there will be the usual polite flapdoodle, and then somebody, Gancourt most likely, or Stein, will move that the meeting be adjourned——"

"And when that happens," the Colonel broke in, "the European Peace Pact is *dead*."

"Dead as mutton," Lord Charles Spencer agreed and laughed mirthlessly. "What's the time?" he asked, after a pause.

"Half-past eleven nearly."

"I'd better go And I would to God I had other business to go on, or another man could take my place."

No more was said as they crossed the room and made their way to the lifts. Farant was hovering in the hall, and the Prime Minister had a smile for him. Even if the heavens cracked it was good to preserve the small decencies. He got into his car, and amid a little burst of cheering from people who were eager to show they recognized him drove off on his melancholy mission.

The Colonel watched him go, and then turned back into the hall of Clarence's. He walked slowly and thoughtfully to the staircase, and his thoughts were not cheerful ones.

They were interrupted by a commotion in the doorway. He turned indifferently to see what it was about. The scandalized Walters was struggling to prevent the entrance of what at first sight the Colonel thought was an irate tramp. Certainly no more outrageous figure than the bearded, bloodstained, tattered individual who now strove for entry had ever disgraced the stately doors of Clarence's. "Some maniac," the Colonel thought bitterly, "who wants to tell us how to save the world, when it's past all saving and sanity," and he was actually turning away when he was startled to hear his name called loudly and urgently.

"Colonel, Colonel!"

He turned, and was across the hall in a flash, unbelievable hopes springing in his brain.

The figure got more violent, and flung Walters to one side "Colonel, it's me—George Berkley!"

"Good God! Berkley!"

"Yes"

"*Berkley!*" The Colonel was flabbergasted for half a second, then all his wits came back to him in a flash. He seized George by the arm, and in a tense voice asked the vital question: "*Fernoy—where's Fernoy?*"

George Stanhope Berkley laughed, and jerked his head. "I've got him outside in a taxi," he said.

"*You what?*"

"Out there in a taxi," George confirmed. "Buck up! The meter's ticking all the time."

Half a dozen pairs of ears strained to catch every syllable of what was said. For a moment the Colonel stared silently, incredulously, at the extraordinary apparition cheerfully informing him of those world-shaking miracles, then at length he spoke. He said more feelingly than he had ever spoken in his life before, "My God, George Berkley, you're a cool customer!"

"Not 'arf!" George answered, grinning feebly. "Cut it a bit fine, though."

Instantly the Colonel sprang into life. Like a flash, he had one of his uniformed men from outside through the swing-door. "Not a soul is to leave this hall for the next ten minutes," he said, "and not a word of this outside it, either, or we shall never get to the Albert Hall! Understand that, all of you—Farant and the whole lot! Roberts, if anybody offers to leave arrest 'em on the spot. I don't give a damn if it's a Grand Duke or a waiter."

P.C. Roberts saluted. He stationed his seventeen stone before the door.

"You 'eard," he said to the gaping hall. "None of you moves him or hout for ten minutes."

"Come on, George!" the Colonel cried, and seizing

the tramplike young man by the arm, he hustled him outside. "Where's the taxi?"

"Round the back. Thought it wiser not to bring Verney into the crowd."

"Quite right. Run, man! What the devil's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," George gasped angrily, "except that I'm half dead. My God, Colonel, you've got a nerve! Run? Damn it, it's as much as I can do to hobble!"

"Sorry! You look all in, that's true enough."

"Here we are!"

Verney was waiting in the taxi, and never in his life had the Colonel seen, nor did he ever hope to see, a more welcome sight.

"Well," he said, climbing in, "I don't know how you got here, and I don't care. You are here, and thank God for it! Albert Hall, driver, and put a jerk into it!"

The huge crowd that filled the roadway in front of the Albert Hall paid little enough attention to a drab-looking taxicab that drew up just before noon at one of the less important entrances. The driver was paid off with a tip that made him gasp, and drove away wishing that more lunatics disguised as tramps came his way.

By comparison with George Berkley Verney looked decent. They had been picked up, after being run down, by a coasting tramp steamer; and George, by a combination of threats and promises of largesse, had persuaded the captain to put in to Fanev, the nearest Cornish port. They were not there before seven in the morning, and two more exhausted men can seldom have stepped ashore on to English soil.

Fanev did not possess a railway station, but it did boast a time-table, a barber, and one solitary and

decrepit motor for hire. By a quarter past seven in the morning George had them all three in action. The timetable revealed the fact that by hiring the one available car they could catch the West of England express to London from Plymouth; and George reckoned that they could safely give themselves a quarter of an hour in Fane before setting out. That quarter of an hour was devoted to getting Verney into something like presentable shape. A shave and a wash did wonders, and when they stepped into a first-class smoker at Plymouth, with two minutes to spare, one of them at least had ceased looking like a more savage kind of tramp.

All this, or sufficient of it was germane for the moment, George conveyed to the Colonel while the taxi made a record journey between Clarence's and the Albert Hall. Why in all high heaven George Berkley and Paul Verney should have been adrift in the Bristol Channel in a rowing-boat the Colonel had not the slightest conception, nor, for the moment, did he care.

He hurried them along winding corridors to a small anteroom. They could hear the hum of the eight thousand people who filled the body of the hall in a solid mass.

Some one had started to chant, "We want Verney!" and in a moment eight thousand throats took up the heavy, deliberate syllables, until the huge building seemed to shake with the concerted noise.

"We-want-Verney! We-want-Verney-Verney!"

"And, by God, you can have him!" the Colonel said, laughing quietly. He took Verney to a small door that opened directly into the hall.

"Go through there," he said. "Walk straight on to the stage and let 'em see you."

Then with George he hurried back along the corridor to a second anteroom, where a uniformed constable stood on guard. Seeing who it was, the constable stepped smartly to one side, but his eyes nearly started from his head at the sight of George.

The Colonel entered the room and looked about him. Twelve men in morning dress stood about in little groups. Some were talking dejectedly, some standing silent, all had the air of men who have lost leadership and cohesion.

The Colonel surveyed them all for a moment in grim silence . . . the saviours of the world, . . . a rum business. . . . For his part, he was not so sure the world deserved saving . . .

"Gentlemen," he said sharply, and they all looked up at him, "gentlemen, you need not worry about the Peace Pact. Mr Verney is in the hall at this moment. Listen!"

A thunderous noise like the roaring of a tremendous sea drowned his last syllables. Paul Verney, who came to bring peace, stood before the peoples of the earth, and was recognized by them.

Seething with excitement and curiosity, yet somewhat sheepishly, the delegates of six nations filed through the door marked "Private" to their places on the stage.

Only the Colonel and George were left in the anteroom. The older man turned. "Now, young man," he said, "let's hear the yarn."

But George was past yarning. He managed to say, "It was odds on Bluefeather, Colonel, but we pipped him on the post." Then, with a sickly sort of smile, he slid to the floor in a dead faint.

The Colonel bent over him as tenderly as any woman

ODDS ON BLUEFEATHER

"You've had more than your money's worth youngster, by the look of you, he said gruffly. "A warm bed and some hot toddy is the prescription for you.'

As he was lifting George to a chair a second outburst of deafening cheers told him that the first signature had been put to the European Peace Pact. The frantic feet of newspaper boys and the humming of innumerable wires took the message of deliverance to an awaiting world.

